Toradora! Volume5

source : https://www.baka-tsuki.org/project/index.php?title=Toradora!:Volume5

These are color illustrations that were included in volume 5

とらドラ5!

夏休みもあけて、文化祭の季節。

クラスの演しものをめぐっての男子連合と実乃梨と独身の争いや、ミス・コンテストのクラス代表の選出など、当日に向けて徐々に雰囲気が高まっていく。

そんなある日、大河の父親が現れ竜児と大河のなれあい関係に波紋を投げかける。また実乃梨と亜美も、夏の別荘以来微妙な変化を見せはじめ……。

それぞれの思惑が交錯し、波乱含みで幕を開けた文化祭の行方は？

ゆりちゃんがつ、ついに三……!?　とか裏口入学系・春田の意外な頑張りなどほかにもいろいろ見どころ満載な超弩級ラブコメ第５弾！

た-20-8

とらドラ5！

竹宮ゆゆこ

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竹宮ゆゆこ（たけみや）

2月24日生まれ、東京都在住。飼い犬はマルチーズのまるちゃん。犬を連れて公園に行き、だっこしてブランコに乗りながらお話するのが日課です☆　するとすぐに公園脇のマンションの家々の窓が一斉にガラッ！　ビシャッ！　と閉まります☆　変な人と思われてる☆

【電撃文庫作品】

わたしたちの田村くん
わたしたちの田村くん2
とらドラ！
とらドラ2！
とらドラ3！
とらドラ4！
とらドラ5！
とらドラ・スピンオフ！ 幸福の桜色トルネード

イラスト：ヤス

1984年8月3日生。O型。徳島県生まれでまだ千葉県在住。ええ、引っ越す予定なんですがずるずる延びて結局動けずにいます……。誰かいい物件教えてください。

カバー／暁印刷

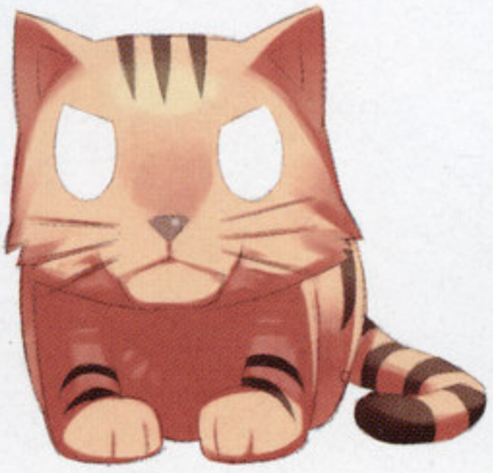
とらドラ！

竹宮ゆゆこ

イラスト◎ヤス

昼休み中の２－Ｃの皆さん。

突然ですが、学校生活は楽しいですか？



逢坂大河

「ああん!?　うるっさいな、そんなモン知らん!　どっかのアホがどっぷり秋も深まってるってのに、お弁当にそーめんなんかもたせやがるから口がつべたくてなんもしゃべれないんだ!」

高須竜児

「……い、いきなりなんだ？　いや、そりゃまあ……最近は怖がられることもなくなったし、みんないい奴だし……ていうか悪い、今ちょっと麺類を食っているから後にしてもらっていいか？　ああ、素麺だ。弁当に持ってきたんだ。ネギにしょうが、シソ、みょうがもあるし、麺は魔法瓶で冷え冷えだ。……秋なのに変？　なにを言うか、秋だからこそ、スーパーで素麺が爆安売りしてんじゃねえか」

櫛枝実乃梨

「えー!?　素麺いいじゃーん!　そんなに不満なら俺のカレー、もっさりかけてやんよ!　……あれ?　な、なんかクラスみんなの目が厳しいぞ?　私のせいで教室中カレーのオイニー充満中?　食が進んでいいじゃないの。ここがインドならそんなん日常だぞー」

川嶋亜美

「ん、なになに？　学校生活？　やだあ～そんなの当然、めっちゃくちゃ楽しいに決まってるよぉ～！　み～んないいこばっかりだし～、すっごく優しくしてくれるし～、毎日とっても楽しくってぇ～……あー、カレーくさ……」

北村祐作

「2－Cはクラスの結束も固く！　非行生徒もおらず！　問題行動もなく！　非常に模範的なクラスであると委員長の俺は自負してい……なんかカレーくさいぞ!?　よしわかった！　全員目をつぶれ！　そして正直に手を上げるんだ！　これより犯人探しを行なう！　昼飯にカレーを持ってきたのは誰だ!?」

能登久光
「……春田、おまえはちょっと黙ってなって。うん。楽しいクラスだと思うよ。ちょっとアホが多いけどね……あ、でもでも、カワイイ女子も同じぐらい多い！ガチかわいいよガチ！」

春田浩次
「カレー犯人探しー？　あはははは　まったく北村はアホだなー！　そんなのインド人に決まってんじゃんなあー？　あはははははー！」

香椎奈々子
「……うふふ。みんな、かわいいじゃない？」

木原麻耶
「っていうか、うちのクラス、まともなイケメンが一人もいないんですけどー!? あーあ、超ラブしたいの、超、超、超つまんなーい！ ……暇つぶしに、まるおでもからかってこよっかな」

おまけ……？

恋ヶ窪ゆり(30)

「……小テストの採点……？　……まだでーす……すいませーん……。……教材の準備……？　……まだでーす……すいませーん……。……やる気……？　ないでーす……すいませーん……。……二日酔い……？　そうでーす……すいませーん……。

……三十路……？　あはは……三十路でーす……すいませーん……あは……あー……」

そんなゆりちゃんはほっといて文化祭編へGO！

デザイン◎荻窪裕司

Prologue

"... So the school has forcefully decided to hold the school festival for only one day again this year? Not even the president can do anything..."

"This isn't exactly a decision they forced through unilaterally. This is a legitimate deal made with the staff, and it actually works in our favour! Since we would have double the usual budget, as well as getting rid of all sorts of silly restrictions. If everything goes as planned, then it'll be worth not holding the festival for two days."

"But no other school holds their school festival for one day only... This tradition sucks. I've heard that the atmosphere in the school festival wasn't really great every year, it's probably something to do with the festival being held for only one day. Even though we're a public school, this is ridiculous."

"That can't be helped, can it? If that's what the school's decided, then we'll just have to figure out something. Even if it's only for one day, we'll do everything we can to hype it up and make it as exciting as possible. After all , this is the last I'll be organizing a major school event."

"That speech of yours a while ago sure was rousing: ' The student council is made to inherit such a lifeless heritage every year! Rather than letting it rot by itself, we should conceive greatness!' -- It was something like this right? Even the third-years were moved to tears, everyone was applauding."

"It's too early to be moved like this. This year's school festival will be exceedingly spectacular, no, we'll see to it that it'll be exceedingly spectacular! Now that I've said it, I'll let everyone see what I'm made of! All of you are on this ship now!"

"Of course we'll participate... Hmm, is 'Kano Grocery' our sponsor?"

"You must use all resources that are available to you, even if it means ruthlessly exploiting your own parents! Hey! How dare you sit there and have all the chips by yourself!?"

"But president, you've eaten all the fried nuggets, too. And just how old are you? Dipping all those chips in the ketchup. Are you still a kid?"

"I'm only 18, of course I'm a kid! Gimme those!"

"Whoa! Stop it! Stop it! No fighting!"

"No! I'm not giving those over, dipping chips into ketchup all the time is doing these chips a huge injustice! Here, senpai! Catch!"

"AH---! Stop smearing my glasses with your oily fingers!"

It was after school in one single Friday, the location was a typical fast food store.

At this moment, no one had noticed that these six members of a certain student council were, under the gazes of everyone there, discussing the plans for organizing a certain routine event.

Chapter 1

Following the order they are seated in their classroom, the male and female students were taking turns using the narrow basketball court during PE lesson.

The current PE lesson took place after a stuffing lunch, as a result, all the high school students in their PE uniform looked rather sluggish and their action was slow as well.

"The girls look rather exhausted."

"So am I, even though I'm a guy... Ooh, panty stripes... "

"Who, who, who!? Where!?"

For some reason, the sound of the basketball rebounding off the ground and of the shoes skidding just felt slow.

Like a herd of domesticated cattle gathered together, a group of boys sat by the corner watching the girls play their basketball in a lethargic manner. Like a bunch of old men wishing not to be nagged by their wives, side by side they laid down on the floor, or rested leisurely

against the wall, or sat happily together with their eyes squinted while trying to make out the secret hidden under the girls' PE shorts.

Upon this group of people, only one pair of eyes shone in a blinding light,

"There's a loose thread hanging from Taiga's trouser edge..."

So said the ranch assassin, wearing a denim jacket and hiding amongst the herd of cattle, ready to strike at any hooligan who dare approaches... Yeah, right. This was none other than Takasu Ryuji, who sat just as lazily as the other guys.

As the match began between the girls, the eyes, which completely do not reflect the will of their owner, were attracted by some other prey. Amongst the dozen or so girls on the court, he was looking at the most energetic and sporting Kushieda Minori running around, swinging her ponytail as she ran. As to why, the answer was because he likes her.

Ryuji's gaze was fixated on her dazzling smile like a magnet. But upon moving his eyes away, Ryuji quickly noticed a hanging thread from someone's trousers. His

eyes were now focused on that thing alone. As to why, the answer was because he just likes "that kind of thing".

"As expected of Takasu, even the things you look at are different. Trouser edge, is it? Mmmhmmm..."

Someone jabbed Ryuji's back with his elbow and said,

"The Palmtop Tiger's ankles, huh... they do look excellent. You have really good taste, you know? Nice work, you big pervert."

Someone else poked Ryuji's abdomen with his fingertip,

"Not her ankles, her trouser edge. Ah, it's really gone loose..."

The dangerous and sharp triangular eyes were attracted by the ankles of a single girl, and were now staring at the side of her loosened trouser edge, as though trying to fire a beam from his eyes and burn it to a crisp... But no beam came out from his eyes, for he was simply swearing to himself that he'll fix those trousers come this weekend.

As for the owner of those trousers, the "Palmtop Tiger" Aisaka Taiga didn't even notice Ryuji's gaze. Looking sluggish, she simply followed everyone else and ran around. When coming under the basket, she would casually raise her hands and pretend to defend, but as she was too short, she posed no threat whatsoever to her opponents as the ball simply flew over her head and into the basket. "Great!" The one who threw the ball was Kihara Maya, who tied her brownish hair on her sides, revealing her tender neck. Whenever she bent forward to pull up her socks, the guys would get a chance to see her curvature on her chest, and couldn't help but exclaim, " Wow!"

"Ah---! Seriously Taiga! It's all your fault!"

"It's got nothing to do with me!"

The only one seriously playing was Minori, who chased the ball and gave orders to Taiga. The warm blood flowing within her body in this lazy afternoon only served to fire her up even more,

"I've been the only one that's been scoring! Taiga, you should show some spirit as well! Aren't you insanely strong? Go get back those points you've lost!"

"Okay, okay..."

Catching the ball Minori had passed swiftly, Taiga decided to make an effort to dribble with the ball. Though she didn't look spirited at all, whenever her opponents attempted to steal her ball, she would speed up and go under their arms, with the ball seemingly glued to her hands.

"Oooohhh..." The boys who were lying on the floor exclaimed softly.

"As expected from the Palmtop Tiger. She's got such great reflexes."

"Her butt's tiny as well..."

Among the flirtatious guys, only Ryuji was thinking about how Taiga might step onto the loose thread from her trouser edge, while also noticing Minori making another cute movement - Clapping her hands and following Taiga while saying "That's more like it! Good job, Taiga!" Ryuji's intimidating eyes were now burning with his one-sided love, and glowed even more dangerously. He quickly shook his head.

Taiga waited until she was surrounded by three opponents, and then tossed the ball between their legs...

"Hey, Bakachi (stupid chihuahua)! Catch!"

"Eh~!?"

This was the weird nickname used by Taiga to refer to Kawashima Ami.

"Whoa! It's Ami-tan!"

"She's so cute! An angel! A beauty! And a top model!"

"Ami-tan looks so damn cute even in a PE uniform! Oh man..."

Originally lying on the floor, all the horny boys now stood up and applauded. They all leaned forward, looking forward to the charming beauty to show her sporting side. This was natural, as Ami is a high school student and a professional model. Not only was her skin white, her face was small, and even her beautiful eyes that are placed on it shone brightly like diamonds. In her PE uniform, her slim and long figure made her look like a beautiful fairy that suddenly appeared from the forest.

In other words, she was acknowledged by everyone as the undisputed prom queen. Even Ryuji, who knew how difficult her personality is, found it hard to look away from her slim figure...

"No way~. My nails are long, so they can't touch the ball, or they'll break~."

Ami twisted her body, and pouted in a sweet voice as she stuck her cherry lips out. She then caressed her face with her left hand, while tossing the ball with her right hand back to Taiga as though throwing garbage away. Unable to react quickly, the ball bounced off Taiga's face and into the opponent's hands.

"Ugh..." Taiga went silent as she held her face with her hands. The audacious Ami even had the nerve to say,

"So~rry~! Oh my goodness, has Aisaka-san gone short from the impact just now~!? Oh no! You have gone shorter... Oh, I forgot, you were always this short. Right? I was just kidding!"

"Hohohohoho~!" Ami put up a cute smile, while behind her,

"Ugh...! What do you think you're doing!? Ami-chan, you're an idiot!"

"Minori-chan, the game's over if you forfeit now, right ~?"

"Don't be ridiculous! I'll show you!"

As Minori ran past Ami, she mischievously tickled Ami's neck, "Ah~" causing her to twitch. This was followed by someone else grabbing her throat...

"What on earth do you think you're doing, you piece of garbage!? Bakachi, you're such a moron! An idiot! A stupid octopus! A phony chihuahua that always plays dumb! A mean person! A person with a defected personality! And a pervert! Prepare to die!"

"Ughhh... Cough, cough!"

There was no way Taiga could ignore such an attack on her. She quickly gave Ami a merciless "Hell Throat Grabber". As her throat was defenseless, Ami gradually knelt down.

"Hey! Minorin! Gimme the ball!"

"Here Bakachi! Catch again!"

Upon receiving the ball from Minori, Taiga quickly aimed it at Ami, who was still kneeling on the floor and coughing. *KAPOW!* The ball travelled in a curve in an incredible speed, as it bounced off Ami's face and back into Taiga's hands.

"Taiga~!? What was that all about!? I'm getting mad now!"

"It wasn't me, it's all Bakachi's fault."

"Cough, cough... Aisaka-san, why, you~"

Ami finally managed to get up. Even til now, it was hard to believe that her angelic face still maintained a pure and gentle smile. Seeing such a pretentious face, even Taiga backed off a bit as a smiling Ami slowly approached her.

Although the scene was quite scary, the boys looking from afar had all had their eyes blinded by their delusions in the sky.

"Such~ a cute smile~ Ami-tan really is an angel~"

"Whoa! Palmtop Tiger has stepped onto her trouser edge..."

"Ami-tan's now riding on the tiger's back. Oh man, I want to be ridden by her too..."

"It just feels good to be ridden by her..."

"Especially when you're looking from below..."

Only Ryuji was aware that another bloody brawl had begun. Ami extended her arms and grabbed at Taiga's throat, while Taiga moved her fingers upwards to poke Ami's eyes. Both their screams echoed across the hall. The girls were no longer in the mood to play ball anymore. Some tried to pull them apart, some ran way, some decided to provoke them further, while others couldn't care less. In other words, it was chaotic. While looking at such a hellish scene,

"Hey guys. You all like Ami-tan, right? You all think she's cute right? At least that's what I think."

With the remnant of his fading blonde dye which he had in the summer still hanging from the tip of his hair (which looked absolutely horrid), Haruta suddenly shouted. He flicked his annoying hair, and with a rare

sign of seriousness placed his hand on Ryuji's shoulder. " That's gross!" Ryuji quickly pushed off his hand. Far off, Ami had stood up, and for some reason, began to squeal in a sound as though she was about to die. Meanwhile, Haruta's forehead suffered from everyone flicking their fingers onto it.

"What's with that pretentious look? Stop being so cocky already!"

"The hell is with that nonsense? Don't disturb my quality time with Ami-tan!"

Pressing on his reddened forehead, Haruta had no intention of giving up on his preciously enigmatic idea.

"That hurts... But don't you all feel the same? You all love Ami-tan, right?"

"Of course she's cute!"

"But for some reason when it's Haruta that's saying it, I feel mightily pissed off. Why're you calling my Ami-tan in such an intimate way? Of course Ami-tan's the cutest girl in the whole class... No, it should be the cutest girl of all the schools within this area!"

"Come again? Let me tell you something, I'm a Palmtop Tiger supporter! That ferocious look of hers is just too awesome!"

"Huh? Then I'm a Kashii supporter! She's so gentle, and can always react to any situation. I'm sure she'll accept a guy like me."

"If that's the case, then I personally think Maya's great as well... Just between us, despite her looks, I hear she still hasn't found a boyfriend."

"No way!? Is that real? No one could tell from that!"

Sitting amongst the gossiping boys, an excited Ryuji too secretly had his own opinion, *I think Kushieda's the cutest. Whether she's looking cool trying to separate the bickering Taiga and Ami with her legs, or getting accidentally bitten by Taiga while putting up a strange face and saying " See... she's not scary at all..."*

Every guy was having his own delusion. As though trying to conclude everyone's thoughts,

"That, is, why! And now, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN ~!"

Haruta said while looking at everyone. "There're no ladies here!" "Who are you referring to as gentlemen?" He ignored their protests and continued,

"Don't you all want to see the girl of your dreams looking even cuter than usual? Like dressing up as a maid! I'm not making this up, you will all have a chance to see it! Really! Takasu, you should join!"

Faced with the minty breath of his friend blowing onto his face, Ryuji stared at that face and said,

"Haruta, are you alright? Have you become addicted to some weird stuff during summer vacation? Like weird drugs? Or media? Or a cult? Ah! Could it be that you've gone weird as a result of bearing a grudge on me for leaving you behind, and going to Kawashima's mansion? "

"Of course I'm bearing a grudge! But that's got nothing to do with this! I'm serious! Ugh... Looks like I've shouted too loudly. Everyone, listen to me. Didn't Yuri say we need to discuss what activity our class needs to organize for the school festival? I, I've been appointed as the committee executive for our class!"

"Was there such a thing...?"

"Didn't know that..."

"And then?"

"Sigh!" Haruta pushed off the people whose reactions were not what he had expected, and stood in the middle, gesturing everyone to come forward as he lowered his voice,

"That's why I'm saying that if our class were to organize a Maid Cafe, wouldn't you all see the girls dressed up as maids? As long as we guys unite, then the girls with their varying opinions will be no match for our block voting, and we'll easily get more than half the votes ... So what do you think?"

"How rare for Haruta to actually come up with something so constructive."

"So has the power switch to your brain finally been turned on after 17 years?"

"I'm sure your parents would feel glad for you."

"Heh heh heh, you can say whatever you like. I take it that you all agree to it? Then it's decided, we shall organize a Maid Cafe..."

"Hold it!"

Noto, his bespectacled ally, now squeezed his way before Haruta and said,

"I don't mean to cause trouble, but instead of maid costume, I personally prefer Chinese dresses! Just imagine Kihara dressed up in that... that shiny material, the tight dress that reveals her body curves, her thighs showing from within while asking you, 'Would you like to have tea~?'"

"Ahh..." All the boys lifted their heads upwards and nodded. *This isn't a bad idea either!* Even Ryuji thought it was a good idea, though he wasn't that close with everyone, but just imagining those beautiful classmates greeting him 'Welcome~' caused his pupils to shine brightly. But after a while, he frowned and said,

"No, wait..."

As though trying to cut himself off from the excitement of everyone as well as his own delusions.

"Now that Takasu? Just when everyone's getting excited... what's with those eyes?"

"How gross! Such lustful looking eyes!"

It was a huge misunderstanding. The eyes that Ryuji looked at his classmates with were not those of rabid hunger, but merely just thinking of something.

Kihara would look good in a Chinese dress, so does Kashii, Ami would of course look good, Minori would probably look cute as well, right? With her hair wrapped in buns...

The only problem was her... Taiga is definitely not suited to wearing a Chinese dress.

When she hears that she has to wear a Chinese dress and show her flat chest to everyone, she'll go into depression again, and would go seriously hysterical to the point of being unable to eat. And I'll be the one that'll be troubled, as she'll no doubt beg me to make some breast pads and brew some soy milk for

her . By then I'll be the one doing all the work! Now is there something that is more suitable for Taiga than a Chinese dress, and does not require me to get involved... AHA!

"How about Goth-Loli style? Those with the light laces and the sort... Wouldn't that be good as well?"

"Gaaahhh~!!!" Taiga can be heard yelling from a distance. The boys all fell silent. *Oh crap, did I go too far?* Ryuji held his breath and waited...

"Takasu... You are a genius!"

"This... is worth applauding... Loli! And it's Goth-Loli! That's exactly my type!"

Clap clap clap clap The boys gave a soft applause, only Haruta looked distressed,

"W, w, wait a minute! We need to unify our opinions first, don't be in such a hurry to come out with other suggestions. This is getting confusing... Erm, er... What was it that we were discussing again?"

Looks like his brain has exceeded its capacity. Seemingly understanding his predicament, everyone looked at the class's No.1 Idiot with sympathetic eyes. At this moment, the real genius appeared,

"Why don't you just open a Cosplay Cafe then?"

All the boys turned their heads around, and looked at the top student Kitamura Yuusaku, who was pushing his shiny glasses up his nose with his middle finger. His tidy bangs were now even sharper after the summer that he now resembles Maruo even more. Curiously, his arms were tanned dark as a result of his club activities and travelling around.

"That's it! That's it! With a Cosplay Cafe, we can have everything! As expected of Kitamura! That Maruo haircut of yours is definitely worth it!"

Haruta excitedly hugged Kitamura over his shoulders, and Kitamura didn't mind at all with Haruta under his armpits. Everyone praised Kitamura for his quick thinking, and mopped his hair and squeezed his surprisingly firm arms. Even his good friend Ryuji patted him on the back with love and respect, while smiling as he visualized his fantasies - Minori in a maid costume,

Minori in a Chinese dress, Minori in a Goth-Loli dress... Each Minori was smiling gently at Ryuji while saying shyly, "Do I look good?" *You look great! It suits you! It's awesome!*

Within this group of excited boys, someone whispered,

"Everything is going as planned..."

Standing in the middle and mobbed by everyone, Kitamura lowered his head and gave a suspicious looking smile, without anyone noticing. "Heh heh heh..." Just when he was giggling quietly...

"All that's left is for them to make their move... Ow!"

"Ow!"

"That hurts!"

His head, the head of the guy next to him, and of the guy behind him, as well as Ryuji's head, all were being hit on by something. The girl's basketball match had finished for some time, and Kuro Muscle had been calling the boys for some time, but they were all gathered

together excitedly and ignoring him. Feeling peeved, he took his roll call booklet and smacked each of the boys' heads.

"All of you! Go and refresh yourselves with some protein!"

"Ryuji! Here, here! Bakachi broke it!"

"Ooohhh..."

In the corridor leading to the dressing rooms, Taiga, in her PE uniform, leaped onto Ryuji from behind, and suffocated his throat by grabbing onto his collar with her entire weight, causing Ryuji to imagine he was crossing the River Styx. Just as he was about to black out, he suddenly saw Taiga doing a spin kick - which got him back to reality.

"It's broken over here! It's all that Bakachi's fault!"

In order to let Ryuji see the extent of damage of the ripped PE trouser edge, Taiga stood beautifully on one

foot while lifting her other in a kicking posture. Ryuji quickly grabbed her ankle,

"Sheez! This is bad... Maybe I could patch this up with some cloth... but it'll need to be elastic... maybe I could use some of Yasuko's old thermal underwear..."

Ryuji thought of his mother's beige underwear and hesitated. *If I only wrap one side, then it'll look too unbalanced. But if I wrap both sides, I'll be altering a school uniform, since PE uniforms are part of the school uniform as well.* "Hmmm....." Ryuji's brow furrowed even more. " Whoa! Whoa!" Taiga, whose ankle was being grabbed onto by Ryuji, began to lose her balance, and wave her hands like a drowning child, but Ryuji took no notice of her. All he was thinking of were sewing kits, needles, the PE uniform and his mother's underwear. He had already entered into "Ryuji World" - A world where if you're not careful and stumble into, you'll end up as a housewife.

"Just wait a minute~ Can you not jump to conclusions? You were the one who stepped on your trousers when you tripped and caused it to break! Takasu-kun, you were there, weren't you? I didn't do anything~"

Trying to rebuke Taiga, Ami purposefully ran to Ryuji's side and looked up with her cute eyes and pouted . "Wha?" Ryuji finally came to his senses and looked at Ami with his menacing eyes. Just as Ami was about to return her usual pretentious smile...

"Phew, that was close! I nearly fell!"

"Wha!?"

Whether it was deliberate or not, Taiga's hands ended up grabbing onto Ami's trousers as she fell, and then pulled them down along with Taiga's momentum.

Before a silent Ryuji and a group of boys standing not far from them, Ami's white hips shone dazzlingly. "Ugh.. ." Ami glared at Taiga, who was rubbing her sweat, and was dumbstruck for a few seconds,

"KYAAAAAAAA-----!!!"

Like an erupting volcano spewing out molten magma, she gave out a terrifying yell.

"Whoa! Loud!"

A few boys suddenly clasped their palms and began bowing in reverence to Taiga, who was covering her ears. Being seen by this many people, whether she was furious or embarrassed, Ami's face was now redder than before,

"W, W, W, WHAT ON EARTH DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!? You gave me a fright!"

"Pft! Bakachi, you should look at yourself in the mirror . You're revealing your true face."

Taiga's smile was full of ridicule. "Ugh!" Upon hearing Taiga, Ami quickly went silent. With veins popping up her forehead, she made a loud grunt, "HMPH!"

And in the next second,

"Heh... Ohohohohohohoho!"

An angelic smile had reappeared on Ami's face. It was a face that was sculpted out of a metallic board with a hammer and chisel. *As expected from the pretentious girl, for her to master this skill into a form of art.* Ryuji couldn't help but look at her in respect...

"Anyway, I'll bring the trousers to your home, have them fixed by next week."

"Hmph!" Taiga ordered in a curiously haughty manner and walked off. Walking very quickly behind her was someone hiding her subtle anger,

"Ohohoho, wait for me, Aisaka-san. We haven't finished talking yet, ohohohoho~"

Ami followed Taiga with her metallic sculpture face.

Ryuji had unknowingly found himself sending off those two to the girls dressing room, as though he had just watched a drama unfold. It was only now that he noticed,

"..."

"..."

Everytime something like this happens, Minori, who would always step in to intervene, was now standing from afar watching them both... or rather, she was looking at Ryuji who was with them. She was sticking her head out from the girls gathered at the corner of the corridor when she made eye contact with Ryuji, and then both went silent.

"... HOY!"

As though suddenly thinking of something, Minori raised her hand and made a stiff greeting. "Uh, hi!" Ryuji also raised his hand in return. But Minori didn't say anything else, and only raised that hand of hers, and began to walk sideways along the narrow corridor like a crab. Keeping a friendly smile on her face, she maintained a considerable distance from Ryuji. Not knowing how to deal with her raised hand, she decided to scratch her head with it,

"Heh heh heh, well then... Yup, see ya!"

After saying that, she quickly entered the girl's changing room.

"W, what was that all about?"

Ryuji's hanging eyes glowed as he tilted his head. Kitamura, who was standing behind him and watching everything developing, also crossed his arms in deep thought and said,

"She's been acting strangely lately. Though she's already strange to begin with..."

Indeed. Minori has been behaving oddly ever since second semester began. Ryuji frowned, as he felt that while Minori still acted the same before Taiga and Ami, she was keeping a distance from him.

After summer vacation, our relationship should be better... Or maybe I'm just deluding myself? Though Minori still looks great even in delusions... Since they are delusions after all.

Ryuji continued to stare longingly at the girl's dressing room entrance, it wasn't until he discovered that a few female underclassmen were looking at him in disgust that he began to walk back to the men's dressing room.

* * *

"Well then. It's now time for the school festival committee executive... Haruta, it's your turn."

"YES!"

After dealing with all the administrative affairs, Kitamura, the class representative, walked off the podium and allowed Haruta to step on. As they walked past each other, they secretly exchanged a meaningful glance. "Counting on you." "Leave it to me!" They both smiled and patted each other's shoulders.

That said, Haruta wasn't the only one that's been appointed as the committee executive.

"Ami-tan--- fight!"

"Hahaha, I'll try my best~!"

First to get on the podium, Haruta gave out a lowly stare. That's right, being cheered by the whole class and walking elegantly onto the podium was none other than Ami.

Being transferred in May, Ami was the only classmate who had yet to take part in any organizing committee, as a result, a certain Single Lady unilaterally decided she was "most suitable" for this task, and so Ami was appointed as the school festival committee executive. For

Haruta, who was chosen as a result of losing at rock-paper-scissors and was originally reluctant to take the role, this amazing good luck had caused his brain to lose a few more screws, not that there were many to begin with.

"This is my first time having to present on the podium. I'm so nervous~ Let's work our best, Haruta-kun!"

"OK! Fight!"

Haruta stood shoulder to shoulder on the podium with Ami and happily exchanged smiles with her. Ryuji looked at his pathetic expression and smiled awkwardly like everyone else as they applauded. This home room session was so far lively, as the boys were exchanging suspicious glances towards each other.

You get it?

Yup.

Ryuji nodded as well, and smiled at the glances others gave him. For them, there was only one aim in this home room session: To get the Cosplay Cafe motion passed.

"Why're you smiling like that? You're creeping me out."

"Whoa!"

Ryuji suddenly jumped up. When he wasn't noticing, Taiga's shrivelled body was wrapping around Ryuji's desk like a curling mouse.

"W... what are you doing!? We're still in class!"

Taiga cuddled even more, and stared at Ryuji with her large eyes,

"Stop asking so much, just give me 'that' already!"

Biting irritatingly at her fingernails, she pointed with her chin.

"'That'? What's 'that'?"

"The one we had during lunch."

Come to think of it, Taiga did say earlier, "I'll come back to eat this, so take good care of it for me!" She then stuffed the fruits box that she brought with her boxed lunch into Ryuji's arms without opening it.

"You want to have them now?"

"Yeah, I want to have them now, when there's still time ."

"Still time... but we're in class..."

"You talk too much! Give it to me, you bastard dog! Stop being so slow, you want me to give you a punch?"

So mean... The boys around Ryuji began to shiver, while stealing a worrying glance towards Ryuji, who could feel the unseen pressure that they're giving: *Please! Stop creating any unwanted trouble during this crucial moment!*

Indeed, if Taiga were to discover the boys' plot, she would definitely destroy everything related to it, since that was the Palmtop Tiger's nature. No, even if she doesn't know anything . as long as Taiga the Troublemaker approaches, the plan would be doomed to fail, such is the power of Troublemakers. Just

letting her come near is enough to change the course of one's destiny, or even lead to one's destruction. If that's the case, I might as well quickly give her what she wants and be done with her quickly.

Ryuji opened his bag and retrieved the small fruits box . The retro-looking cloth bag (though the design was retro, the pattern was quite contemporary, with a dark blue background matching the hand-drawn black and white geometric lines) which wrapped the box was bought through mail-order, as Ryuji liked it very much. " Wow~" Taiga licked her lips as her eyes glittered,

"Hurry up!"

She anxiously swung side to side. *I'm already taking it out, why are you rushing me for?*

"Open it!"

"Me?"

"That box is very hard to open, I'll always spill the contents. So hurry up and open it!"

How selfish... though now's not the time to complain about it. Ryuji proceeded to open the box as instructed, within

it was a mango, Taiga's favourite. Like a small child, Taiga grabbed her fork and looked at the mango, getting ready to pick it up.

"Why are you eating here!?"

"Saves me the trouble of having to return the empty box to you."

Meanwhile, on the podium,

"Well then! Let's get back on topic! Today's agenda is to discuss what should Class 2-C organize for the school festival."

Haruta, whose face beamed brightly, seemed to be getting carried away by his excitement as he clutched on the podium desk and glanced down at everyone. Ami maintained her smile while holding some sort of hand lotion tube and applying it on her hands, in other words, she couldn't care less. Taiga leaned on Ryuji's desk and seriously tried to poke the slippery mango with her fork, not interested in what Haruta was saying. "Go back to your desk and eat!" No matter how Ryuji pushed and shoved, she refused to budge.

Ami and Taiga weren't the only ones who weren't interested in the agenda being discussed, it was the same for all the girls. Some lay on the table sleeping, some were reading magazines under the table, and though some were facing the podium, they had their ears stuffed with their white earphones as they listened to their music . Though these quiet ones were fine compared to the more contemptuous whispers being said by the others, " Can we not do anything?" "I just hope Haruta doesn't go showing off too much,"

None of you would look good in Goth-Loli. This was Ryuji's opinion. *Though we're going to decide on a Cosplay Cafe, you are neither suitable for those cute lacy clothings, nor will you look good in a Chinese dress or maid costume. The best you can do is to work behind the scenes... No wait, that would be kitchen. Can I leave the kitchen to these girls? Absolutely not!* Ryuji shook his head vigorously. *Whether it's cooking or washing the dishes, I will have to take care of it!* Ryuji had once again fallen into "Ryuji World" - All he was thinking was an extremely messy kitchen during the noisy school festival, with all the leftovers piled up on the tables, and all the clogged drains - *Don't touch those! Leave them all to me! I'll take care of them all!*

Now is not the time to be day dreaming about such stuff! As Ryuji finally came to his senses, Haruta had begun to table his motion,

"Well? Nobody have any suggestions, right? If that's the case..."

Cosplay Cafe.

Just when the mastermind was about to pick up the chalk and write on the blackboard.

Just when all the guys were clutching their fists in excitement.

Just when Taiga, sitting at Ryuji's desk, went "Ahh" and was about to stuff the mango into her mouth (While closing her eyes for some reason).

Just when Ryuji thought *Crap, the mango's dripping*. And was about to hand a handkerchief to Taiga.

"Life~ is~ merely~ 17~ years~"

So lamented Oda Nobunaga while being surround by flames in Honnoji... Yeah right, it was actually Minori, who saw as nobody said anything, decided to say

something. As though carrying a flame on her back, she turned with full of vigour and slowly got up,

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Incident_at_Honn%C5%8D-ji

While facing his end in Honnoji, this was the poem sung by Nobunaga as he lamented at how short life was: 人 "Life is merely 50 years / Looking at things under heaven / Everything is nothing but dream and illusion / Once given life, should there be any man that doesn't perish?"

Minori merely changed 50 years to her own 17 years.)

"As for my suggestion..."

Squirm

Her shy face quickly went red. Like lightning, a bad feeling ran past the United Coalition of Men. On a certain level, Minori was far more dangerous than the "Strongest " and "Fiercest" Palmtop Tiger, this was because she was the only person who could freely manipulate the " Strongest" and "Fiercest", Taiga's personal beast tamer.

The beast tamer was now squirming around and shyly drew circles with her fingers,

"Um, well, it's not that I want to do this. Or, rather, I actually hate it... But, I've been thinking, wouldn't it be great if everyone can have fun? Since everyone says it's fun, so, though I don't like it, but... I heard someone has a great idea, no no no, I'm no good at coming up with one myself, but everyone will like this idea. That's right, I'm talking about that... a ho... hou... house of... ugh!"

Yikes. The whole class quietly backed off. The blushing and squirming Minori was now suddenly bleeding from her nose. The whole class went silent. Ami accidentally squeezed out a few centimetres worth of hand lotion. " Huh... huh!?" Taiga remained seated with her jaw opened and dropped the mango she was holding, which was swiftly picked up by Ryuji.

"Sniff... ahem... heh heh... my nose's bleeding... Oh no, don't get the wrong idea, I'm not thinking of anything naughty here. It... it's just, well... I, I, how should I say this, I'm thinking we should make a h, h... house of horrors..."

Everyone in class could see her placing tissues onto her nose as more red blood flowed out. Even with tissue pressed onto her nose, she still giggled as more blood seeped through. It seemed she was really excited.

She's hopeless. Everyone remained speechless, and looked perplexed at this curious classmate.

"Kushieda, that's enough. Your body won't be able to take it any longer."

"What?"

Inside the frozen classroom atmosphere, someone stood up. It was none other than Kitamura.

His glasses shone brightly as he deliberately kept his voice low, for fear of getting Minori too excited. He crouched his back as he slowly approached Minori.

"Cuckoo, cuckoo..."

He widened his eyes and waved his arms about, mimicking a rooster as he walked over, attempting to calm Minori down. Unable to move her eyes away from a strange looking Kitamura, she rubbed the blood off her nose and widened her eyes in awe, trying to look carefully at him as he got closer.

"Cuckoo, cuckoo... that's right... Kushieda, come to the clinic with Papa Rooster. You've got to stop that nosebleed, right? Don't worry, Papa Rooster will table your suggestion for you."

Minori's eyes looked strange, as though falling into some form of hypnotism.

"R, really?"

"Yes... cuckoo... come here, over... here!"

With speed faster than the eye can see, Kitamura grabbed Minori's shoulders with both his arms. Just when everyone had thought he'd grabbed her, in the next second,

"Trying to beat me in speed? How foolish!"

"Cuckoo!?"

"Kitamura-kun, I've seen through your plans already... You underestimate Minorin! Come on, let the show begin !"

"K, Kushieda!?"

"Nobody move! If anyone does anything funny, I'll use this..."

Indeed, the Strongest, Fiercest, and "Craziest" person of the class had to be Kushieda Minori.

"And poke it in... here!"

Minori tightly held Kitamura's hands behind his back and gave a mischievous smile. She stuck out her finger like a gun, and aimed it at the bottom of Kitamura's bottom. *This'll be bad if she really pokes that in!*

"Kushieda! Please don't do this!"

Haruta yelled from the podium.

"Haruta stop! Kushieda's serious! Her grip is over level 50!"

With his glasses sliding halfway down his nose, Kitamura, now a hostage, pleaded with Haruta to not interfere. Everyone in Class 2-C looked shocked. Ryuji and Taiga can only look at a hostage being taken, but can do nothing about it besides dropping their jaws. "Dun, dun, dun~" Someone began humming the theme song for some detective drama. *A situation has arisen! The atmosphere is getting tense, but our hero has yet to appear.* Minori looked at the classmates' foolish expressions and then smiled even more evilly,

"Oh my, it's not like I really want to get Kitamura-kun crippled over there... I only have one request! And that is for our class to organize a House of Horrors!"

"Ugh!"

Maybe it was because Minori shouted loudly beside his ear, or the fear of being jabbed in the arse, Kitamura shivered. Haruta could only stand petrified as he bit his lips, while murmurs spread around the classroom. *This is bad!*

"Did you say House of Horrors...?"

"Bleh! That sucks..."

"Not only that, it's troublesome to make as well..."

"And I'm not interested anyway..."

"We're already high school students, and we're still playing House of Horrors?"

"Kushieda, your idea sucks! Mega sucks!"

The girls were right, and the United Coalition of Men was intent on heading towards their goal of a Cosplay Cafe, so they would not allow anything to go wrong.

"If you want me to accept Kushieda's condition, I can't do it."

"Yup, same here."

"Sorry Kitamura, you'll just have to sacrifice for us."

"Farewell."

"Bye bye, Maruo."

Everyone waved their hands to Kitamura. Tears welled up beneath Kitamura's glasses, and disgustingly flowed to his neck,

"You guys are so heartless! ... But! I, Kitamura Yuusaku, as your class representative, am prepared to throw my feelings away and sacrifice for your sake!"

"Huh...?"

"Come on, Kushieda! Do it! Bring it on! If poking into my ass is going to satisfy you, then suit yourself!"

Kitamura lifted his butt, seemingly prepared for it. Minori smiled casually,

"How brave of you. Youth is great, isn't it, Kitamura-kun? ... In that case, you'd better grit your teeth !"

Creak! Minori cracked her knuckles, while Kitamura closed his eyes and placed his hands on his sides fully prepared. Everyone could not bring themselves to watch such a depressing scene, and all turned their eyes or covered their ears, trying to stay as far away from it as possible.

"Hmph... but I must tell you beforehand, I won't be the only one that'll suffer a loss. Because once you're done, the flames of desire within you will disappear..."

Kitamura was not content to go down alone, so he decided to proudly say that to Minori. *He's bringing her down with him! Way to go! If he does that, Minori might just retract her suggestion.*

But it was too naive, everyone was too naive.

"Suffer a loss? That's a whole different matter. Aren't you getting this wrong? Do you think you can appease me with just Kitamura as your sole sacrifice?"

"W, WHAT!?"

"Well then, I wonder who the 'next sacrifice' will... be... HIYAAAA!!!"

With an insane scream, Minori jabbed into Kitamura with all her strength, and all Kitamura saw that instant was a starry expanse. If Minori was not willing to retract her suggestion, then Kitamura's sacrifice will be in vain.

Rumble rumble rumble Just as her finger was about to land on its target.

"Come out! 'Shadow Brigade'!"

Haruta yelled and raised his hand, pointing towards the back of the classroom.

Though nobody replied and rushed out at once, a group of boys stood up at the same time.

"S, shadow Brigade!? Whoooooaaa!?"

In incredible speed, they have rescued Kitamura and lifted Minori into the air.

"What're you guys doing!? Let me off! I won't give in to this! No way! Even if Kushieda isn't here, the House of Horrors will continue to live on in people's hearts... Ahhhhhhh..."

The Shadow Brigade lifted a bleeding-nosed Minori and rushed out of the classroom. Minori's screams became softer and softer until she could no longer be heard. *Forgive me.* Ryuji thought as he clutched his fist tightly.

Kushieda, forgive me for not rescuing you. All of this is so that I can see you in all sorts of cosplay.

"M, M, Minorin!? Stop that you idiots! Just where the hell do you think you're taking her!?"

Taiga, who had been watching all along, now stood up and pointed towards Haruta.

"She's been sent to the Morgue! A most suitable place for those who prefer to use violence to settle their differences!"

"What!?"

Upon hearing Haruta's swift reply, Taiga yelled back, and then quickly sat down,

"R, Ryuji, what's a Morgue!?"

"That's where they place dead bodies."

"Dead bodies... so Minorin's already..."

"OW!"

Poke! For some reason, she decided to pick this moment to poke her fork into the mango that Ryuji was holding, poking his hand along the way, causing Ryuji to

writhe on the table in pain. Taiga nonchalantly placed the mango into her mouth, and said while chewing, " There's no way Minorin will end up there." It didn't seem like she was worried at all.

On the other hand, Haruta looked at the classroom with Minori removed. *Kitamura's safe, and the interference been taken care of, now we can return to the agenda.*

"Well, with the disturbance out of the way, let us continue! I have an idea for the school festival! And that is we organize a Cos..."

At this moment,

"La~ lalalalalala~ la~ lalalala~"

"W, who's singing!?"

Haruta was once again interrupted. Someone was sitting at the corner of the classroom with her knees wrapped , looking absent-minded towards the sky and humming.

It was the Single... sorry, the homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri (Aged 30).

"... Permission denied..."

As the Single Lady (Aged 30) ages, the face that she lifted to slowly glance at her students seemingly looked rounder. She wore loose beige cotton trousers that concealed her body curves and a beige V-neck collar shirt with ribbons on her sleeves, and one could even see her legs wrapped in beige coloured stockings if they look carefully. This was because the colours of pink, blue and green were strictly reserved for twenty-something ladies. In addition, she can't wear lace, she can't wear flowery patterns, she can't wear silk ties, pleated skirts, or even reveal her knee caps anymore. Such was the pitiful life of Koigakubo Yuri as she turns 30.

30 years old... Miss Single (30) now looked aimlessly ahead.

I only came to Tokyo for the sake of studying, unlike my friends, who only know how to slack off while I studied seriously to obtain my teaching diploma. When I graduated, it was the height of the recession ice-age. Compared to my friends , who had to send hundreds of resumes only to be rejected, or just decided to delay their graduation for as long as possible when they hadn't found any work, I consider myself quite lucky to have passed my teaching qualification exam. From

then on, I've been working hard - since then, I've even become a homeroom teacher now. The parents seem to be satisfied with me, with the current economic climate, my salary is way better than your average lowly OL. (At least I can afford a 100,000 yen a month house rent!) (Not to mention I can even take my mom to Hong Kong for a holiday, and bought a Hermes Garden Party tote!)

As my schoolmates get married one by one, I began to grow used to it. Since they were of the "Ice-Age" generation, they could only find jobs in medium to small sized companies. Before us there was the "Pre-Bubble" generation, and after us there's the "New-Bubble" generation trying to squeeze in for the limited number of jobs out there. Stuck insecurely between these two groups, it's only natural for them to cling onto some form of "certainty". I can only imagine, and am fortunate at how lucky I am. Right now I'm no longer anxious or jealous, since I'm an adult already. Besides, I'm ONLY thirty. It's only reaching this age that I realize that it really isn't such a big deal.

However, there's just one thing.

Lately, a cousin of mine, who's the same age as I am, had a kid who's going to start junior high next year. Her mother even went all the way to call me about it, even though I didn't want to know about it, but you know how country folks are...

It's only junior high, after all.

If I were to have a kid tomorrow, by the time he gets into junior high, I'll be 43 already, yup. Besides, it's not like I'll be having a kid tomorrow, or the day after, or next week... so it's no big deal...

"Denied... Permission denied..."

Like the soldier in the fated Mount Hakkoda Death March, Miss Single (Only 30!), in search of a future she could not see, marched in vain towards the podium where Haruta and Ami were standing.

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hakk%C5%8Dda_Mountains_incident)

"Y, Yuri-sensei?"

"Back off!"

Miss Single (Still just 30!) literally butted off Haruta and Ami, and then smashed her fist on the table, glaring venomously at the whole class,

"You're not allowed to do anything interesting!"

She uttered words unlike what a teacher would normally say.

"Coffee shop? ... Denied! Private cinema? ... Denied! Home-made theatre play? ... Of course not! Forming a band in a concert?... Ah! That has got to be the worst suggestion this nation has ever seen! All this nonsense that lasts for only a day is all just an illusion! No matter how much you date, you'll be breaking up with him by Christmas! As your homeroom teacher, I hope you'll be able to see the cruelties of life! Having attended a girls-only school, all I've experienced is the pain and suffering of reality! So you're not allowed to do anything! ... Absolutely not! ... Do you have any idea what an " Employment Ice Age" is? It's hell, I tell you! You can send your resume to hundreds of companies and none will give you a reply. Even if you get hired, you'll be out of it before you even pass your three month probation! All these experiences have got me battered and my personality twisted. Even if you've smoothly found a job,

the boyfriend that you've been dating since university would say 'Your life seems to be going quite well. Huh? A new car? Wow, being a public school teacher sure is great. How much's your pay? Whoa... But, do I really have to pay that much tax for your behalf? Hmph!' And then he dumped me... Sob... sob...!"

This is becoming unbearable. At this rate, our homeroom teacher (aged 30) will degenerate into a demon... Haruta snapped his fingers, and the Shadow Brigade appeared once again.

"What is wrong with working haaaaaaaard!?"

Even the homeroom teacher had been hauled off towards "the Morgue". It seemed Haruta was dead serious today.

Knock! At this moment, someone knocked gently on the door. Kitamura, holding onto his still intact butt, quickly got up and exchanged a few words with a student from another class, who seemed to be someone from the Student Council.

"Thanks for the message! Be careful now!"

Kitamura saluted and sent the messenger off. *Be careful ? He's not skipping class, is he?* He then stepped onto the podium and announced,

"A phone call from the Student Council! A while ago, the principal and dean have come to an agreement!"

Phone call? ... But he received the message from a messenger ... Ignoring the perplexed looking classmates, Kitamura said loudly,

"This year, the school festival shall have... an Inter-Class Competition! The activity organized by each class will be voted for by every student in the school, together with the votes each class's representatives in our Campus Queen and School Hunk competition collect, the class with the most votes will get to receive valuable prizes! Here's a simple illustration..."

Kitamura excitedly began drawing strange-looking circles and arrows on the blackboard. "I don't get it!" Everyone complained.

"Ugh, anyway, back to the topic! Here are the awards for the winning class!"

Scribble scribble scribble With incredible strength, Kitamura left very clear chalk marks on the board as he wrote:

1. Have their air-conditioner replaced wit
2. A private refrigerator for the classroo
3. Students are allowed to use the normall
4. Students no longer have to participate
5. Discount vouchers for Kanou Groceries.

The classmates below the podium murmured... Especially the girls, who were initially uninterested and lukewarm about organizing any activity,

"... Don't we want a new air-conditioner?"

Indeed, the girls usually hate dry weather.

"... Don't we want a fridge?"

Indeed, the girls would always wish that they could store their unfinished pudding, fruits and drinks away and keep them cold.

"... Don't we want to use the electric mains in the bathroom?"

Indeed, the girls would always hope they could use their hair dryer at school.

"... Do we really want to do any cleanups?"

Indeed, the girls normally hate cleaning the bathrooms.

"... Don't we want discount vouchers for the supermarket?"

This was Ryuji's favourite. Though Kanou Groceries was a bit far from where he lived, the quality of its goods was one of the best and most varied in the area, which explains its slightly higher price than other places, as well as why Ryuji would want those discount vouchers. He unknowingly licked his lips, completely unaware that Taiga was looking at him with a disgusted expression as she ate her mango.

"Oh my, now I suddenly feel like I want to win this!"

"I wanna use my hair dryer! I definitely want to!"

"Yeah! Yeah!" Nearly all the girls stood up and yelled in excitement. "This looks a bit bad..." Haruta looked intimidated for a bit, but Ami ignored his presence and announced,

"Alright, alright! Then can someone please come up with any ideas? I'll be writing them on the board... Yuusaku, you're in the way, so get off."

After driving Kitamura off the podium and ruthlessly rubbing off his words on the blackboard, Ami turned and smiled her angelic smile, "Now, any ideas~?" Though his voice was no match for the noisy girls, but as those that come first get served better, so Noto decided to bring up his courage,

"Me! Me, me, me! I suggest we have a Cosplay Cafe!"

At last! ... Someone has said it! Including Haruta, all the boys applauded. However...

"EH------!!!???"

Before Ami could finish writing, the girls were already booing.

"That's too otaku-ish! No way man! No way!"

"We're bound to overlap with other classes anyway!"

"Ab-so-lute-ly not!"

"Besides, what're the guys going to cosplay as? Mudskippers?"

"Are you pervs thinking of getting Ami-chan to dress up in all sorts of scantily-clad clothes!?"

"You're all perverts!"

"Go to hell, you lecherous scum!"

Poor Noto was nearly reduced to tears as he was roundly abused by the girls.

"How about we open a 'Cowboy Club' and have the guys take charge outside while we stay inside?"

Kashii Nanako flicked her slightly curly hair and said in a voice that melted into the atmosphere. The small birthmark at the corner of her mouth gave her the feel of a grown woman not found in other high school girls. " That's a good idea!" Maya quickly agreed.

"As expected of Nanako-chan! It is a wonderful idea~! Let's have a Cowboy Club instead!"

"Yup, Cowboy..." Ami said as she beautifully wrote the suggestions on the board. *The atmosphere's now heading to a dangerous direction. But the real challenge comes afterwards.*
..

"How about we open a 'Drag Bar'? That'll certainly be interesting!"

... If this wasn't "challenge", then what is?

"Hey, good idea."

"Since if we're having a Cowboy Club, then we must have good-looking guys..."

"That's why we'll be better off doing a comedic route...
"

"I'm sure Takasu-kun would be popular dressed as a girl..."

"M, ME!?"

Ryuji began to shiver in shock. "Pft!" Ami couldn't help but laugh when she saw Ryuji's face. Taiga remained seated at his desk and said disdainfully, "That's hardly funny at all... You've all underestimated the power of Ryuji's face. Don't worry, Ryuji. I won't let you go out in drag." Taiga's indifferent attitude only ended up hurting Ryuji even more.

But it was hardly over. The normally self-inclusive and obscure yaoi fangirls now came out of hiding and said,

"Instead of drag, how about we have a 'BL Cafe'? The butler will be seme, while the slightly haughty waiter will be uke. They'll be affectionate and mean to their customers simultaneously... How's that? Kya! I've said it! "

"W, w, wha!? Affectionate and mean to customers simultaneously... Can you please elaborate on that?"

"Maybe we could make it dramatic?"

"That's a great idea. As expected from our senior fujoshi (yaoi fangirl)!"

"Come, all you fujoshi sisters, follow our eminent matriarch!"

"Matriarch, do you mean we should stage a 'BL Theatre'?"

"KYA! Who'll be the seme? And the uke? Do they need to speak courteously? What about glasses? And maybe white tuxedos?"

"We need the Martiarch to work on the script!"

"KYAA! A brand new story by her! Sisters, selling it on Yahoo! Auctions is strictly forbidden!"

Even the spice girls were now overwhelmed by the yaoi fangirls. Though no one had any idea what on earth they were talking about, they still applauded for some reason. "So it's decided?" "Isn't that idea great?" The girls were becoming increasingly bold and unstopabble. There were yells and screams everywhere, the boys could no longer open their mouths. Even Kitamura had covered his ears and shut his eyes as he meditated in his own world. Haruta leaned on the podium desk and yelled in pain,

"We won't get anywhere with this endless debating! If that's the case, let us settle this with a ballot! Everyone, write what shop you want the class to have on a small piece of paper, and then pass it up here and into this plastic bag!"

In an attempt to break through this sense of imminent defeat, Haruta came up with a most brilliant suggestion. Ryuji quickly pushed Taiga back to her seat, and proceeded to write "Cosplay Cafe" on a small piece of paper. *The other guys must be writing the same answer. No matter how fired up the girls are, they're merely disparate opinions. They'll be no match for the rock solid United Coalition of Men!*

Theoretically, that should be the case...

"Alright! Has everyone cast their votes? Is that all? Now to mix them up and draw lots to decide the winner in one go! That's how we fairly decided the swimming duel between Ami-tan and Taiga last time! So there'll be no complaints, no matter what the result! That's the conclusion!"

"Alright!"

... Only the girls replied.

Draw lots?

Decide the winner in one go?

That's the conclusion?

"Wai..." As the United Coalition of Men were about to raise their hand in query, Haruta had already pulled out a small piece of paper while smiling cheerfully.

"Here's the result! The activity Class 2-C will be having for this year's school festival will be --- Pro... WHAT!?"

The paper piece flew off Haruta's hand. Ami quickly picked it up and said,

"I wonder what it'll be? ... The hell is this!? Pro-wrestling smackdown (with serious tackling)... What is this!? Just who wrote such a suggestion!?"

"Are you kidding me!? What were you guys thinking!? Why wasn't it 'Cosplay Cafe'!?"

Haruta yelled besides Ami. Ryuji pointed out in a calm voice,

"The real question should be, why did you not decided the winner by majority vote?"

After five seconds of silence.

"...ARGH!!!"

All the boys fell onto their desks weeping. *How can Haruta be so damn stupid!? ... He must have cheated his way into this school...*

As the classroom was filled with wailing, someone snickered alone at the corner in the back...

"This is what you get... for discarding your homeroom teacher..."

Miss Single (30), has returned from "the Morgue" by her own will and determination. With dust all over, she casually passed her paper piece forward without anyone noticing, and with a stroke of good luck, her piece was picked by that idiot Haruta. By the way, clutching onto Miss Single (30) by her ankle as she escaped from "the Morgue", and covered completely in rubbish was none other than Minori. She fell to the floor as she reached the classroom, and did not make it in time to hand in her own paper piece, which read "House of Horrors" on it.

Now that things have come to this, what was there to be done?

"Let's leave this aside for now!"

Haruta pretended as though nothing had happened, and snatched the paper piece from Ami's hand, crumpled it up and tossed it aside. But no one blamed him for doing that. *We'll just have to wait for the homeroom teacher to leave after class and discuss it once again.*

"OK, let's forget about that!" Haruta once again stood before the desk, while Ami combed her bangs and smiled angelically.

"Now... let's begin the homeroom session! Today's agenda is the school festival! Though we don't have much time left, we still need to nominate our class's representative for the Campus Queen competition!"

"What about the School Hunk?" Someone asked.

"I heard that the Student Council will have special arrangements concerning the nomination of the School

Hunk during the day of the fesitval. Though I said we need to choose someone to be our Campus Queen, I don't think we even need to choose, right, Ami-tan?"

Haruta looked at Ami, whose widened eyes looked as though they were about to fall off.

"Eh? Me? Ehh? What is it? I don't get it at all!"

"There you go again. You know very well that if you participate, we'll definitely win the Campus Queen competition!"

No one objected to what Haruta said and nodded in unison. Everyone was thinking as long as Ami takes part, she'll surely win.

"Eh~!? You're kidding right? I can't, I just can't!"

Surely win? Why, that's already decided centuries ago! Hahaha! So laughed Ami inside her heart, though on the outside she continued to squirm forward pretentiously like a prawn and waving her arms, her butt nearly touching the blackboard as she backed away.

"While I'm glad that everyone thinks that way, but actually, I've been appointed as the MC for the Campus

Queen and School Hunk competition~! I'm so sorry, guys . You even went all the way to pick me~"

"WHAT!?" Everyone exclaimed. Ami's chihuahua eyes looked happier as a result, as well as a bit more haughtier .

"Was there such a thing!? I'd nearly forgotten! Or I should say, I have no recollection of that. So that's why~! Now what...? How about... But that's a bit too pathetic..."

Haruta looked at the near death Miss Single (30 and still fired up). *It'll be quite amusing if we let the homeroom teacher to take part in the Campus Queen competition.* Just when everyone was thinking the same way, Ami interrupted them,

"Um, Haruta-kun, I'm afraid that won't do. The rules clearly say... Joke entries strictly forbidden. In other words, no drag, no teachers, no students from other classes, no two-dimensional characters, no parents, etc. So we can only choose a girl from our own class."

The murmuring from a while ago seemed like an illusion, for Class 2-C now fell into silence, at a loss in what to do.

Having to choose a cute girl from this class, and it cannot be Ami the professional model, the epitome of cuteness.

It was natural that everyone was at their wit's end. Everyone was born into the generation of consequentialism. They value uniqueness more than being the best. This was how everyone was brought up, being taught how every person is good or beautiful. And so it was hard for them to distinguish who was truly cute ...

"I think Aisaka-san would be a good choice."

"What did you say!?"

"Heh!" Ami, whose senses were different from the average person, smiled and looked mischievously towards Taiga below the podium. Completely ignoring a yelling Taiga, who woke up from her daydreaming and looked murderously at Ami, she continued,

"Look at her. Aisaka-san's so small and cute, and everyone in school knows her as the Palmtop Tiger, so she has to be popular, right? Who knows? She just might surprisingly attract quite a lot of votes~."

"Attract your ass! What is this nonsense, you super Bakachi!? Why must I take part in this!?"

Taiga, whose mouth glittered as a result of being smeared with mango, kicked her chair off and stood up.

"Hmm... but I think it's a good idea."

"The tiger is indeed quite famous..."

"If it's just attracting votes, there's no better choice than the tiger."

"S, SHUT UP!"

Taiga roared with all her might, causing the just fired-up boys to fall silent again. Only Ami maintained her smile and continued,

"Hmm? You, can't, do, that, little tiger. Since you are a member of our class, you do have a responsibility to take part in the class's activities~"

Ami even threw a wink, causing the fuse in Taiga's flamethrower temper to be ignited.

"Why you Bakachi... trying to pretend you don't know anything! I'll settle this with my own hands then, not just the school festival, I'll have this school disappear from this world!"

Not caring whether the contents in her drawer fell off, Taiga effortlessly lifted her desk above her head, preparing to throw it towards Ami on the podium. Including Ami, everything lying in the path of the desk's expected trajectory were ducking for cover. At this moment...

"Now, now, calm down! Since we may actually get a chance to win if Aisaka were to participate. I personally think Aisaka's a good choice as well."

"Ah..."

Upon hearing Kitamura's voice, Taiga's legs quickly went wobbly, and the desk she was carrying above slammed straight onto her head. Reaping what she sowed, she knelt on the floor in pain.

"T, Taiga!? You alright?"

Ryuji quickly lifted the desk off her, but it was too late.

"... Who are you?"

With a remarkably amazing clumsiness, Aisaka Taiga had now gone into amnesia. "Ooohhh..." With that sound , Ryuji glanced with the corner of his eye towards the podium.

"Then it's decided that we'll nominate Aisaka-san to participate!"

Hiding in the corner with everyone else, Ami announced loudly, followed by wave after wave of applause.

One final note worthy of mention. At this moment, Miss Single (living hard as a 30-year-old) was no longer in the classroom.

She was already filling in the official application form for the class's activity, which was of course " Pro-wrestling smackdown (with serious tackling)". She even chopped it with her teacher's seal.

Does that idiot Haruta really think he can just leave that aside and pretend nothing's ever happened? How naive. After

8 years of teaching and 12 years of being single, the students simply had no idea how formidable a single lady can be.

Chapter 2

"I wonder if we've got onions at home..."

"Are you kidding me? Ah--- This is pissing me off, pissing me off, pissing, me, off!"

"I'm sure we've still got some bell peppers, maybe not enough mushrooms... and then..."

"That moron Bakachi! When she comes back to life, I'll make sure she ends up in hell!"

"... We've still got two or three pieces of sausages I guess... Right then! I'll use that for tomorrow's boxed lunch..."

"Hey, what should we do!? Has it really been decided!?"

"Hmm, what to do... I wonder if we need some cabbage as well?"

"..."

The one-sided conversation came to a halt as Taiga stuck out her thumb. In the next moment, a loud wail echoed under the sky in the sunset.

On the elm tree path where housewives would ride on bicycles full of their groceries and junior high students would chat away happily, Ryuuji was on the ground writhing in pain.

A curious dog came over and sniffed Ryuuji, causing its owner to pull it away by its leash.

Ryuuji was neither kicked by Taiga (who seemed to have regained her memories), nor was he beaten or even strangled by her.

"... That'll teach you."

Using only her thumb, Taiga had it jabbed into Ryuuji's left waist with all her strength. With only that, Taiga had caused Ryuuji's vision to blank out. For a sadist, she had to be the most efficient master ever. The only problem was that Ryuuji was no masochist.

"W... what are you doing...!?"

Ryuuji held onto his waist, still reeling in pain, and glared viciously at his assailant, who stood before him and simply said,

"The thumb represents my heart, and your pain is the manifestation of mine."**

(TL: Can someone with the raw verify this somewhat enigmatic phrase Taiga's saying? This is the best I can come up with.)

- (I believe the correct translation is actually a pun of sorts. I'm pretty sure she is saying, " Shiatsu's heart is my heart. Your pain is my aim .")

As Taiga cracked her knuckles, Ryuuji couldn't help but shiver and turn his eyes away. *Where on earth did she learn such a technique?* Looking down at the intimidated Ryuuji, Taiga satisfyingly squinted her sadistic eyes and said,

"This is what you get for not listening to my complaints. So seriously listen, since I'm feeling quite annoyed. Even though you're a dog, if your heart loses its humanity, you're really a goner."

"Wasn't I listening to you all along!?"

"When!?"

"Like I said, I was listening the whole time! I said you ought to give it up, as you should occasionally take part in the class activities, didn't you hear that? But you kept going 'But, but, but' to no end! Since you were the one who refused to listen, how can you blame me?"

"Because I really don't want to join! I can't help it!"

Hmph! Taiga snorted, half-closing her eyelids and lifted her chin up insolently. Her fair-coloured hair fluttered under the breeze, like the clouds floating under the crimson sky. The lines on her pale complexion and rose-coloured lips looked as fine and elegant as a ceramic doll's. Looking at that grouchy-looking beauty, Ryuuji held onto his waist as he got up,

"You really are narrow-minded, you know that?"

Indeed, if it weren't for that acupuncture attack on Ryuuji, he could have said it with more consideration. Something like "Didn't Kitamura also think you were the best choice?" or "You'll win this, don't worry" in order to comfort Taiga. "Ugh..." Upon hearing Ryuuji's criticism,

Taiga folded her arms across her chest, bit her lips and furrowed her brow as her face showed a pained expression. What was surprising was that even Taiga too felt that she was being narrow-minded.

"Serves you right!" Ryuuji continued with his assaults, "There was never any room for your heart, was there? Do you plan to live so narrow-minded for the rest of your life?" *Occasionally giving her some stinging criticism can be a good thing.*

Taiga looked unyieldingly at Ryuuji, but as he was quite correct, she could say nothing in return. Instead, she replied painfully,

"What, why are you so excited for..."

"Excited? Me? How?"

Taiga was moaning ambiguously.

Ryuuji could hardly recall when he was ever excited. One month into the new semester, he had no memory of anything that could get him excited... If Taiga meant the source of his agony, Minori, then she was seriously mistaken. Ryuuji had felt an unspeakable distance had appeared between him and Minori, which occasionally

led him to feel depressed when Taiga was not around, so he was particularly pissed off at Taiga's remark.

"Tell me, when was I ever excited? What do you know anyway?"

"Forget it... Forget I ever said that, dalmatian."

"Who you calling a dalmatian!?"

"You."

Losing interest quickly, Taiga scowled and clicked her tongue, "Tch!", and then quickly turned around and increased her pace.

"We're moving. The supermarket's limited sale is about to begin. Didn't you say you want to get some pork ? I might as well remind you, remember to buy some cabbage... what are you squirming over there for!? I'm gonna abandon you in the streets like a stray dog if you don't hurry..."

You were the one talking enigmatically and wasting our time! Besides, whose fault was it that I couldn't move after getting jabbed on the waist!? Ryuuji said nothing, and quietly followed Taiga, swallowing his complaints as he

headed towards the supermarket they used to frequent. *Taiga said she wanted to have ginger pork rice for dinner, but looking at the pork for sale today, might as well make marinated pork belly. As for the common ingredient for these two dishes...*

"The ginger's already chopped up, and Yasuko's rinsed them already, right... Taiga, give me your monthly living fee."

Ryuuji caught up with Taiga and stuck his palm out as he walked besides her.

"What? Now?"

"Or I won't have enough cash to buy tonight's food."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, Your wish is my command, master."

"What's with that mode of speech anyway?"

Dependent on Ryuuji for her three meals every day, Taiga would pay 10,000 yen to Ryuuji once every month for him to cover ingredients he needed to buy, as well as all other living expenses. Taiga did not show any reluctance as she obediently took out her pink cat-faced

pattern purse from her bag, though she ended up dropping her pens, books and notes on the road as well.

"S...seriously... You really ought to be more tidy..."

The fallen objects were left to Ryuuji to pick them up while Taiga looked inside her cat-faced purse,

"Oh, I need to go to the bank. I'm out of cash."

"This won't do...", she muttered to herself and walked on her own pace. Her cat-faced purse kept on dropping all sorts of bills, which were all left to Ryuuji to pick up as well.

Their destination was the ATM machine in the convenience store.

"Hey, they're serving oden already."

"Oh really? So it's that time of year already, huh?"

Upon entering the automatic doors, they could smell the smell of oden, informing them that autumn had arrived. Smelling the oden, Taiga slowly wandered towards it, but was quickly caught by the neck by Ryuuji, who turned her towards the direction of the ATM

machine. Ryuuji decided to go read some magazines while he waited for Taiga, so he headed towards the colourful magazine shelf, but after only taking a quick glance...

"Eh? Why?"

He heard some repeated beeping, and saw Taiga tilting her head in puzzlement.

"What's wrong?"

"That's strange, no money's coming out... But why? What's going on?"

Taiga handed the advice slip to Ryuuji. Just when Ryuuji was about to only take a glance, he couldn't help but notice the amount printed on it. The amount remaining in Taiga's bank account was 0 yen. *Of course no money's going to come out that way.* Ryuuji looked towards Taiga, who was frowning and was at a loss.

"How do you expect to withdraw money when there's nothing in your account, dummy? Sigh, you can give it to me tomorrow, I'll do the paying today."

Ryuuji took out his cash card from his red bag and was about to stick it into the ATM machine without hesitation . As for why he did not hesitate, this was because the ATM machines in convenience stores do not charge any extra fees (Ryuuji is extremely cautious when it comes to his own family's expenses). Yet Taiga stopped him,

"No, wait!"

"What now? Don't worry, it won't charge me anything extra."

"That's not it! It's too strange... Something is definitely wrong! It's just impossible!"

"It can't be helped even if you say it's impossible. You don't have any money alright? Stop moaning already, you'll be troubling other people now..."

"Because when I withdrew money last week, I was sure there was still money inside my account! Even with transfers, there would always be some remainder left. So how is it possible? That person would always wire money into my account every month..... I get it now..."

Taiga suddenly went silent, and stared bitterly at her cash card,

"Is it because I wouldn't answer his calls...?"

"W-what?"

"That's why he decided to do such a thing..."

"S-sorry about that... Anyway, let's go outside so the other people can use the ATM machine. Come on."

Apologizing to the people on the queue that were waiting to use the ATM, Ryuuji grabbed the motionless Taiga and exited the convenience store. He brought Taiga near where the dustbin was so as not to get in the way of other people.

"What are you talking about? Just what happened?"

"I can't believe he would use such a method... That's why I hate him..."

Taiga didn't look at Ryuuji's face. She didn't even move her lowered head as she continued to stare at her cash card. The breeze blew her hair around, causing it to touch her lips, yet she remained still.

"I don't know what's going on, but... you alright?"

Ryuuji parted Taiga's hair with his fingers and bent to look at Taiga's expression. Feeling annoyed, she pushed Ryuuji off and finally said softly,

"A while ago, that person - my dad, called me many times. But I was mad at him, so I ignored them. I even deleted all his messages... That's why he decided to wipe my account..."

"That's..."

Absolutely ridiculous. Ryuuji kept silent.

Ryuuji wasn't sure whether it was the daughter's fault for collecting her allowance from her father but ignoring his phone calls, or was the father being ridiculous for confiscating her allowance... Or was it reclaiming it? ... and messing around with his daughter's life. Ryuuji felt confused, not because he didn't have a father himself, but

because the relationship between father and daughter in the Aisaka family just seems very complicated.

Taiga, of course, felt that her father was being ridiculous,

"That damn old man..."

She muttered in a near mute voice,

"I'm really going to have to kill you... really..."

She was about to crush the cash card she was carrying. Ryuuji frantically snatched it from her and placed it back into her cat-faced purse.

"How can you say such stuff about your own dad!?"

The moral gauge that Ryuuji used at such a moment felt unusually empty and hard to understand. Perhaps already guessing what Ryuuji was thinking, she looked coldly and disdainfully at Ryuuji, who could only remain silent and helplessly be stared at.

As though on cue, the phone in Taiga's pocket began to vibrate. Taiga grabbed her phone through the decoration on it and roughly pulled it out of her pocket before flicking it open,

"He must be calling to threaten me..."

Her eyes were lacking in focus as she gave a twisted smile. Looking at her face alone, Ryuuji could guess who was calling.

"Answer it, you still need to say what needs to be said, or how are you going to survive without your allowance ?"

Ryuuji said only that and left Taiga alone as he reentered the convenience store. He spent time reading at the magazine shelf. He then went to have a look at Taiga's favourite milk dessert, and took a look at some drinks as he walked into the snacks aisle, checking if there were any new snacks for sale. He finally took a glance at the oden beside the cashier, although he didn't see carefully what the ingredients were.

He mechanically estimated the time left while peeking outside the window to see how Taiga was doing. When

he saw her closing her cell phone lid, he knew Taiga was done talking. Her fair face looked troubled as she placed her phone back into her pocket.

He decided to walk solemnly towards Taiga.

"What did your dad say?"

He asked in a casual tone, while holding his breath, trying not to get too involved in the tightrope-like father-daughter relationship within the Aisaka family.

"Ryuuji, are you free afterward?"

Taiga turned her face around and spoke stiffly.

"Nope, I still need to go to the supermarket."

"Let me do the shopping, give me your money. If you don't have enough, go draw some more. You don't need to do the shopping. What you need to do is head to the coffee shop on the second floor of the station complex. Do you remember? The non-smoking bagel shop next to the place where I bought my handbag?"

"What?"

"Have you forgotten already? It was raining that day and we didn't bring our umbrellas. So we ended up killing time there with Minorin and Bakachi, remember? You ordered coffee while I ordered a salmon bagel..."

"That's not what I meant... Why don't I need to do the shopping?"

"... Minorin and Bakachi both ordered cheese toast, and then Bakachi said she's got some temporary joining order or something like that and can't open her mouth too wide..."

"Temporomandibular Joint Disorder, you mean? No, that's not the point. I'm not really asking about that shop, because I completely don't get what you're talking about. "

"You know."

"No, I don't."

"You don't?"

Taiga swallowed what she was about to say and shook her head, as though thinking how to say it...

"You will go to that coffee shop and meet him in my place, and then get the money back from him. Any questions?"

Ryuuji finally understood what was going on...

"..... NO!"

"Why not!?"

Taiga yelled and said,

"Just go! Don't worry! You can definitely sort things out! Go get the money! GO!"

Unwilling to yield, Ryuuji yelled even louder,

"I said no! If there's nothing to worry about, why don't you go yourself!? Why must I get involved in your family matters!?"

"I'm not ordering you to go, I'm hoping you would go! So please go!"

"That can't be done! Besides, your dad doesn't know me! Won't you find it strange if he suddenly sees a guy he's never met before coming up to him and say 'I'm here

to collect your daughter's money' with a face like this? If I were him, I would refuse outright!"

"Then couldn't you just explain to him? What is that mouth of yours used for? Or has your dog brain forgotten how to utter human words already?"

"What is this attitude? Is this how you request a favour from other people!?"

"Stop fooling around already! Listen to me...!"

"Don't be ridiculous!"

Not content with just being loud, they started shoving each other back and forth outside the convenience store, and neither was willing to yield.

"Please! I beg you! I've never begged you before, have I !?"

"Of, course, you, have! You've been begging me to do things for you everyday! Just last night at your apartment, didn't you say you couldn't find your remote control and begged me to look for it? I spent two whole hours looking for that!"

"You really like to bicker on the small stuff, don't you? No wonder no one loves you! Now go! Come on! Just go! I'll prepare dinner! And wash all the dishes! I'll wash tomorrow's as well! And the day after! So please... go!"

"Whoa!"

Thud! Taiga suddenly turned the tables, and Ryuuji fell on the ground on his bottom as the passers-by coldly glared at him. *Maybe I should just make a run for it?* Unwilling to surrender, Ryuuji was about to get up when ...

"Please..."

Instead of saying "Serves you right!", or "You should have listened to me earlier", she was now begging in a weak voice. Her brows were tilted upwards as she went quiet and softly tugged Ryuuji's sleeve.

"Okay? Ryuuji..."

"Sigh... really... Why must I go..."

"Please..."

Taiga lowered her head pitiably and tugged at Ryuuji's sleeve with her tiny white hand until he nodded.

* * *

When Taiga saw the photo that was the source of Ryuuji's depression, she burst out laughing.

With such a menacing face with those intimidating eyes, besides the word "gangster", there was just no other word to describe such a person. An aura of terrifying unpleasantness emanated from the person in the photo, and all these characteristics had been passed on to Ryuuji . The whereabouts of the source of his genes, the person in that photo - his father, is currently unknown. When she saw that photo in the family restaurant in the middle of the night, Taiga laughed and shook her body so much that she was in tears as she said, "Wha-, what is this? You look just like him! How did you manage to get such genes?!"

And right now, Ryuuji was thinking the exact same thing. *Does that mean I'm allowed to laugh as well?*

"Oh... is that so? I understand now. In other words, my daughter won't be coming, right?"

"Yeah... sorry."

Before him was a man in his forties reading a memo written by Taiga while wiping a sorry tear off his eye. His mannerism aside, besides using the word "small", there was no better word that could be used to describe his size. Just one look at him and one could guess that he was Taiga's father.

"This fellow here is Takasu Ryuuji, a friend of mine. Give the money to him. - Taiga" The memo containing Taiga's messy handwriting was now being carefully folded up by Mr. Aisaka, before being carefully placed into the inside pocket of his seemingly expensive coat. It was never Ryuuji's habit to observe other people's mannerisms, but he just couldn't help but notice how the man before him moved. It was really rare to see a person with such mannerisms; Ryuuji felt like this was probably his first time seeing someone like him.

Just what kind of work does he do for him to be able to wear such clothes and have so much free time in the evening? Beneath his wrinkle-free wind coat was a high collar shirt , which shone with a glow, Ryuuji could instantly tell it was made from a fine material. He wore no tie, but

instead, around his neck was an elegant silk scarf. *He definitely doesn't look like your average salary man, though I already know he's quite rich...*

It's just that... he's hardly unlikeable at all.

Although he was probably the least qualified to do so, Ryuuji had already decided Taiga's father had passed his first impression test quite well. *He's not so bad.* He looked tidy, and didn't really give out any negative vibes. Just one look and Ryuuji could tell what his tastes were. His slightly tanned skin matched quite well with his beige jacket. He could already be called an "old man" at that age, so it was quite impressive that he could still dress in such a way. Although truth be told, he wasn't exactly handsome. Compared to Taiga's doll-like beauty, though his appearance wasn't that bad, it was hard for Ryuuji to describe this trendy old man as handsome.

"I'm sorry that you have to be Taiga's messenger. Um... Takasu-kun... I really wanted to see Taiga, which is why I used such a drastic method... I've ended up being hated by her, haven't I?"

"Yeah..."

"Takasu-kun, are you mad?"

"No, it's just my eyes... they look fierce..."

"I- I see, I'm sorry."

To be more precise, it was Ryuuji's expression that looked fierce, not his eyes. Taiga's father seemed more relieved after Ryuuji had explained it, relaxing his stiff shoulders, and smiled for the first time. On his hand that was holding a cigarette, he wore a watch with an elegantly designed crocodile skin strap, while the gold watch itself was polished so clean that it glittered. In order to reveal the mechanical gears within, the digits were made of transparent material carved so finely that it was dazzling.

What a beautiful watch. Ryuuji couldn't help but stare. Although, with some hesitation, he finally spoke,

"Umm... I think smoking's not allowed here..."

Ryuuji had stopped the retro-looking lighter from lighting up the cigarette. Taiga's father widened his eyes and looked around before realizing the situation,

"Really!? Oh yeah! That's right! I see... no smoking here as well, huh... It seems like everything is non-smoking

nowadays... Sigh, to be hated by my daughter, now I'm even being driven out for being a smoker... I feel like the world hates me now."

Feeling depressed, Taiga's father sighed. Caressing his face like a cat, he unhappily put his cigarette back.

"Then... should we go outside?"

"Oh, no, it's fine. You haven't even drunk your coffee yet, and neither have I."

He then passed the menu to Ryuuji, while waving his hand like a bird,

"If that's the case, how about ordering something you like? Would you like cake or something?"

"I... I'm fine, really... since I'm about to have dinner soon..."

"Ahhhh....."

Taiga's father once again leaned on the table with his hands on his head.

"Er, no, I mean... Yeah, I'll order this one, egg bagel would do..."

"Really!? Excuse me, I'd like to order something."

Taiga's father lifted his head and beamed happily. That face was indeed different from Taiga's, with only his round head resembling Taiga's somewhat. To put it simply, Taiga's father was quite small in stature, probably even smaller than Yasuko. His shoulders were small, and so was the hand used to summon the waitress. Even his well-manicured fingernails looked miniature. Ryuuji noticed his nails were varnished with a layer of polish and glittered slightly. *This old man even knows how to maintain his fingernails.*

"An egg bagel for him, and as for me... a salmon bagel will do. What does it have inside? Butter and cheese? Really? Then I'll have that, with lots of cheese please! Thanks!"

"You like cheese?"

"Huh!? How did you know!?"

Ryuuji could feel himself getting tired and sighed deeply. It was how he would often respond whenever he saw Taiga reacting like that. He looked helplessly at Taiga's father. "Why's that? Come on, tell me!" Taiga's father smiled happily, and waited for Ryuuji to reply.

How should I put this...? It seemed like all the friendliness and cuteness that was lacking in Taiga could all be found in her father. Although he was a middle-aged man, his smile was unusually friendly, and his round eyes turned round and round slowly.

"Hmm... bagels huh...? Hoho, there seems to be quite a lot of trendy stores here, all catered for girls, no doubt? This isn't a bad place for the OLs that commute home from work to take a break here when passing through. The interior decorating's gorgeous as well, Scandinavian, I guess? A lot of people say girls tend to like this sort of wood, but I wonder how the guys would think? Do you normally come alone into these sort of stores?"

Taiga's father had suddenly changed the subject.

"No, I wouldn't come in alone myself... Lately, I found myself preferring the more elegant wood colour, how should I put it... something with burls ... the ones that look heavy... Yeah, something like chestnut."

Ryuuji had unknowingly reverted to his usual habit. " Oh, we've got similar tastes it seems!" Taiga's father exclaimed excitedly at Ryuuji,

"Me too, I prefer the deeper-coloured wood, like chestnut or oak... These walls are purposefully painted with diatomite in order to contrast with the sepia decorations and bring out the casual feeling. The chairs should be made of a rough material, while the kitchen ought to be decorated in a way to display all of its stainless steel utensils."

"The floorboards should be made of a sturdy material so your footsteps can be heard when you step on it."

"The ashtrays should give people an impression that they're heavy."

"They should arrange the lamps to hang down on top of the tables."

"That's right, that's a great idea! The lamps should be sepia and antique-looking! That would be the most ideal design for men!"

That's right! Ryuuji realized he was about to reply without regard to his manner, and quickly swallowed what he was about to say. *He's an adult, and this is my first time meeting him. I shouldn't have gotten so carried away.*

Ryuuji concealed his awkwardness with a cough and took a small breath. *That was close! I nearly got dragged into some strange world.* Ryuuji sipped some coffee to calm himself down, and was mindful not to say too many unnecessary things, though he still carried a smile on his face.

He was a bit happy, all because Taiga's father said they had similar tastes. As a rabid follower of interior design magazines, to be able to have a chance to discuss this with a man with such exquisite tastes was a rare opportunity.

On the other hand, *Is Taiga's dad really that glad to be exchanging his tastes with a high school student?* Although he looked worried a while ago, Taiga's father's eyes now glittered with curiousness as he looked around the store,

happily knocking the table and wall with his fists, as well as sticking his head out to inspect the indirect lighting.

Thinking about it, Ryuuji realized this was the first time he had such a conversation with a man of that age. At the same time, Ryuuji wondered what he should say next. If possible, he hoped the cheerful conversation could end now, so that he could finish what he came to do and go home quickly. But Taiga's father still looked rather enthusiastic, inspecting the tablecloth at one moment, staring at the postcard used for decoration the next while muttering, "Ah, so it's a photograph. And I thought it was a painting."

Is this what you call being idiosyncratic?

"Ah yes, before I forget, I'd better hand this to you. Ah. .. looks like my plan failed. Taiga's really mad at me, right? I could feel her murderous intent over the phone... "

"Um, sort of... whoa!"

Ryuuji nodded casually as he received an envelope from Taiga's father, only to be put off by its incredible weight. *Could it all be 10,000 yen notes inside? This is so thick and heavy... just how much money is in it?* Ryuuji

dared not imagine, just thinking about having to carry all this home on his own was enough for him to break out in a cold sweat. *This is an insanely huge amount of money! Does Taiga always receive this much all the time?*

"Please tell Taiga I'll transfer the usual amount to her account by the end of the month."

"Ehhh..."

Ryuuji was shocked once again. *Transfer some more at the end of the month?* Just the money in the envelope was enough for him and his mother to live for six months. *And he's saying he'll transfer another lot by the end of the month? But that's only a few days away from now! How is this possible!?*

Yet Taiga's father did not notice Ryuuji's stunned expression and sighed softly, caressing his small face as he said,

"I really want to see Taiga, I really do. She wouldn't even let me hear her voice... I'd like to talk to her... as I have something important to tell her."

At that moment, Ryuuji suddenly saw true sadness on the face of Taiga's father, and the envelope he held now felt unusually heavy.

After her father remarried, Taiga's presence was deemed to be irrelevant, so she was driven out, and placed into a huge apartment. *Taiga's dad had abandoned her, and he was a man that would do such a cold-blooded thing*. .. That was what Taiga had told him, and it was what Ryuuji believed, but...

Would a cold-blooded man make such an expression? Would he sigh like that and have such distraught looking eyes?

I'm not sure about the details, but has something been confused? Ryuuji didn't know what to do with the heavy envelope, and could only hold it with both hands.

Taiga's father never once looked at the out-of-place envelope and said,

"Is Taiga fine lately? Has she been feeling troubled? Well... how should I say this? Are you... and Taiga... in *that sort* of relationship? I mean... are you guys dating?"

The sudden question from Taiga's father gave Ryuuji a fright, but he quickly shook his head and denied it at once,

"No. How should I put it... we're friends. It's just that I happen to live next to her apartment block... and we get along together quite well. We're not dating... we're more like a brother-sister relationship... That's what I think anyway..."

"I see... so that's why..."

No matter how much our interests are alike, any guy that tries to approach my baby Taiga must be exterminated like the pests that they are. Ryuuji reckoned that was probably what Taiga's father was thinking, as he saw him now looking more happy and nodding his head upon learning the truth.

"Let me ask you, has Taiga been stalked by any weird people? I've been hearing a lot about crazy stalkers and stuff like that."

"That's already been taken care of, besides, Taiga's very strong."

"You're absolutely right!"

Taiga's father now looked quite relieved and smiled with his eyes squinted. That being said, there were some wrinkles at the corner of his eyes. *Could he have been...*

"Taiga's... still mad about her account, right... Yeah, I guess she must be mad..."

Is he feeling painful and remorseful at being hated by his daughter? He smiled in a self-deprecating way,

"When we spoke on the phone, she told me that I must take responsibility for abandoning my child... As expected, she still thinks the same as before, she still believes that I had abandoned her."

"Didn't you?"

"No, I didn't."

For just a second, Ryuuji felt that the strong glance Taiga's father gave to him looked just as painful as Taiga's.

"No, it wasn't like that. It was definitely a misunderstanding... Our divorce was unavoidable. I just

couldn't get along with her mother, so we had to come to this last resort... Afterward, I found a new partner who wasn't so bad, so I married her. But as my new wife was too young, Taiga just could not get used to living with her, not to mention all sorts of misunderstandings led to things snowballing out of control, and in the end either Taiga or... Yuu, my present wife... would have to leave that house. So Taiga..."

The two bagels had arrived. The one as big as what Taiga had before was wrapped in paper.

"Yeah... why didn't I stop her back then? Even now I still dream of that scene. It was a cold winter's day, and it was snowing outside. Taiga was crying and making a ruckus as usual, and she threw lots of stuff at Yuu, causing her nose to bleed... Our house had become like a battlefield, or rather, like hell... I went through so much just to remarry, thinking I could rebuild a happy family, but I never expected it to have come to this. Even I was getting agitated by it all, and accidentally said some very mean stuff. I never really meant it, but... it must have sounded like it was aimed towards her, in the end, Taiga's face... lost all expression, like a lamp being switched off."

Ryuuji looked at his bagel. *Can I really finish such a large piece?*

"Then it was like loosening a knot that was tied, Taiga disappeared beyond the door. No matter how much I ran after her, she ran further away, and now, I can't ever catch her again... And that was it... Why couldn't I catch her? I couldn't even catch her in my dreams, as she would always slip away from my fingertips. The clothes she was wearing... Yes, I can still remember she was wearing a lavender-coloured cashmere jumper, with a ribbon tied on her waist. I tried to grab her ribbon, but it slipped off my fingers. And I tried to hold onto her tied hair, that too slipped off... I could hear the door opening, very loudly. At that moment, Taiga ran out..."

The eyes of Taiga's father looked distant as he recalled that day in the snow,

"... And never came back home."

This is too unbearable. thought Ryuuji as he picked up his egg bagel and chomped a piece down. Taiga's father then said,

"I want to live together with Taiga, once again. I wanted to tell her that."

"Eh..."

Ryuuji froze.

What did he just say? With his mouth full of food, Ryuuji had forgotten how to chew as he widened his triangular-looking eyes and glanced perplexedly at the man before him.

Live with Taiga... That's what I heard, alright. Can't be wrong.

Ryuuji could not care about the taste anymore as the food rolled around in his mouth while he tried to remain calm. Although he couldn't figure out what he was feeling inside, Ryuuji still quietly asked a question that he had to ask,

"But... won't it just end up the same again? Because... because of that..."

"No, I won't allow the same thing to happen again. Because I know it's my fault, I hope to start all over with Taiga, just the two of us. Taiga is the only princess that I

have and I value her more than my life, and this time, I won't make the same mistake again... This bagel looks good, I'd best start eating."

Ryuuji looked at Taiga's father pick up his salmon bagel with his small hands, slowly unwrapping the paper wrapping. He could not understand the meaning of what Taiga's father had just said.

Hope to start all over, just the two of them... That means...

"I'm going to get a divorce with Yuu, it's already been confirmed, and I've spoken with Yuu. After that, I'll be living with Taiga, since I am her parent after all... I love her, there's no need for us to be apart. If I ever see her another day, I'll definitely say that to her."

"Are you... serious...?"

"Of course I'm serious... oops!"

"Whoa!"

The salmon flew out from the bagel as Taiga's father was about to chew on it. Just as it was about to fall on the

floor, Ryuuji quickly caught it. *Now what?*
Lightning-shaped furrows appeared on Ryuuji's brow as he frowned.

"Good catch!"

Taiga's father took the salmon from Ryuuji's hand without hesitation, and clumsily placed it back into the bagel, giving Ryuuji a thumbs up. *He is indeed related to Taiga. They're both clumsy. Not to mention they look very alike whenever they get excited about something.* Ryuuji then felt strange, because he had finally realized it.

Although it was quite embarrassing to talk about Taiga with this man, it didn't feel bad.

Ryuuji could feel his unsteady heart telling Taiga,

Something big is happening! Your dad is coming to pick you up!

* * *

Clank!

Every time that sound was made,

"I told you everything's fine, so stop coming in all the time!"

"Okay, okay... just don't break the dishes."

Ryuuji could not sit still. Without noticing it himself, he was standing behind Taiga, looking worried at her inexperienced movements.

"You're annoying, get lost!"

Roar. Taiga bore her sharp tiger fangs towards Ryuuji. If he was not careful, she could bite his hand. Yet Ryuuji could not bring himself to leave. For him, the sight before him was that of fear, terror and suspense, so he continued to stand anxiously outside the kitchen.

Taiga was placing the dishes she had washed precariously onto the dish rack, and rather nonchalantly stacked the heavier dishes on top of the smaller bowls...

"Whoa!"

"Oh god!"

The dishes once again made an unbearable sound as the pile collapsed in the stainless steel sink. Ryuuji could watch no longer,

"Like I said, these dishes should be..."

He couldn't resist helping out.

"I know already! Enough! Stay away! Didn't I tell you that I'd wash the dishes? You go boil some water to make tea!"

"That..."

"And don't look over!"

Hmph! Taiga snorted, but seemed intent on continuing with the dish washing. While Ryuuji was glad that she had kept her word, seeing her like that only made him even more worried. Being naturally clumsy, Taiga's movements tended to be too abrasive. Coupled with her personality, she refused to accept any of this. She would apply detergent on every dish, and after scrubbing it

very roughly, would place the sponge aside and rinse the dish with both hands. The way she placed the dishes was messy as well, since she didn't bother turning the bowls upside down after washing them. Not to mention she allowed the detergent to splatter around too. Being this messy and straightforward, this was her indifferent attitude. Moreover, water was splashing all over the sink, dripping onto the floor as well as getting her apron all soaked.

How can she be this clumsy?!

Not allowed to help out or say anything, Ryuuji was nearly going ballistic. *The dishes should be applied with detergent once in one go, and then they should be stacked up like a pyramid inside the sink so that when the water flows from the faucet, they will be rinsed from top down. Not only is this efficient, but it saves a lot of water, ensuring all the dishes gets washed with the least amount of detergent. Speaking of which, she's turning the faucet to full blast, and if that huge water column is allowed to keep on flowing...*

"Wah!?"

Water came gushing out, splashing everything. Taiga, with her hair wet, stood there motionless.

"....."

Not even Ryuuji knew what to say anymore. He knelt on the floor, took out his dry rag, and began rubbing the soaked wooden tile floor. Taiga didn't say anything, as though silently acknowledging Ryuuji's help. She didn't think twice as she wiped the water off her face with her lather-filled hands, and continued her dish washing.

"AH! You're kidding, right? You actually placed Inko-chan's bowl together with ours! You really are dense!"

Ryuuji's hand stopped rubbing on the floor after that senseless remark.

"Of course I didn't! Are you an idiot? That's the small container from your own lunch box!"

"Ehh... really?"

"Of course! How could I possibly place a bird's food bowl together with the other dishes..."

Oh crap.

Ryuuji frantically turned his head and revealed a friendly smile, but it was already too late, the damage had been done. The ugly parrot Inko-chan glared at Taiga and Ryuuji with a sharp glance, disgusting foam drooled from his rotten meat-coloured beak. His half-closed eyes spun around with resentment, his feathers twitched as they expanded, and his glare was like a sharp arrow. From his personified appearance, one could easily tell that he was very unhappy.

"It's not like that, Inko-chan! Listen to me! I didn't mean to say Inko-chan is ugly, I was only just trying to emphasize what a stupid mistake Taiga made, that's all!"

His master began to explain.

"I'm a bird, I don't speak human..."

Inko-chan snubbed Ryuuji with a reply that Ryuuji wasn't sure who taught him. He continued to stare at Ryuuji. As he was about to look down, he suddenly lost his balance and fell. *Thump, thump, thump.* After walking three steps,

"Eh! Pee! Taking a pee... no, not a pee... eh...?"

He seemed to have lost his memories. Suddenly, he opened his beak, his dreamy eyes looked a bit confused, and tided his feathers while trying to figure out what he was doing a while ago. *Aha! I remember!* And then he went to nibble at his lettuce.

I see... Ryuuji clasped his fist. *As expected from a bird brain, he'll forget things once he's walked three steps.* It was a good thing Inko-chan only had a bird brain, or there would be an emotional scar from his master.

"Really... to talk with such an ugly thing... You're increasingly becoming un-dog-like."

"Stop calling him ugly! His name is Inko-chan! Right, Inko-chan? Ohh... you look great today. Ah... how cute, how amazing... Inko-chan's the most merciful child ever, I love you so much!"

"Hmph, you'd even probably find a pile of dog shit lying on the road cute as well."

"D, dog sh... wha!?"

Taiga closed the faucet and walked in great strides with her flat chest puffed up. Ryuuji was still shell shocked by Taiga's vulgar remark as she stood before him,

"See. I'm done washing. While you were talking to that ugly thing, I finished my dish washing."

Hmph! She then lifted her chin loftily, proudly declaring mission accomplished. *Now's not the time to be shocked.* Ryuuji stood up and nodded, he even applauded ,

"Wow... amazing! You really are a genius in doing chores!"

"Of course. As long as I feel like doing it, nothing would look hard."

"You've got talent. If you do it more often you'll be able to master it!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, go brew some tea already. Hurry!"

"I can feel your potential. Tea is it, I'll go brew it right away."

The apron Taiga held out was all wet, yet Ryuuji didn't complain a bit. He just calmly complimented her. *This is definitely much easier than having to call a pile of dog shit cute .*

Not to mention this was the first time Ryuuji has ever seen Taiga wash the dishes ever since he knew her. The anxiety in not being able to help dispersed upon Taiga finishing without much incident. *It doesn't matter even if she doesn't do it well. What's most important is that she has the heart to continue...* Compliment her so that she'll be willing to wash some more - that was Ryuuji's plan.

Besides, *If Taiga's really going to live with her dad, it would be troublesome if she doesn't even know how to wash dishes, wouldn't it? Although I don't know if they'll be living together, I might as well treat it as so for now.*

As the water was being boiled, Ryuuji quickly wiped the dishes dry and placed them back into the cupboard. He then filled the teapot with the tea leaves the landlord gave them. Normally when brewing green tea, one shouldn't apply hot water directly. Ryuuji, however, preferred to add hot water into the tea pot right away and allow the green tea leaves to expand and slowly drift apart along with the water flow. The fragrance of the

leaves would then meander in the scorching steam. After quickly pouring the first brew into a cup, he allowed it to cool before pouring it back in to brew a second time. The first brew would be a bit bland in taste, but as it was hot, it was most suitable just after meals. The more condensed second brew could then be enjoyed slowly after finishing the first brew. A great advantage of brewing like this was that there was no need to leave the table to brew a second time.

"Where are the snacks?"

"Here."

From the snack box Taiga had brought a few days ago, Ryuuji took out two Baumkuchen cakes and placed them on the plate. After having a 250g ginger pork and three bowls of rice, Taiga still wanted to have dessert. So Ryuuji decided to have some with her tonight.

As Ryuuji carefully placed the plates on the short table ,

"Get up, how are you going to drink your tea while lying down?"

He patted Taiga's legs. Taiga, who had already placed her cushion on the floor as a pillow, now waved her hair and got up,

"Snacks... how come there are only two cakes?"

"One is for me."

"Damn... how stingy. You should've brought the whole box over, for goodness' sake!"

Taiga scowled upon seeing Ryuuji had only brought two cakes. "Yeah, yeah," Ryuuji replied casually as they both sat upright, and turned up the TV volume to watch their weekly nonsensical quiz show. Their dialogue had turned rather monosyllabic,

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Weirdo."

Ryuuji found himself looking at Taiga's cheek. Taiga took no notice of him as she continued to watch the TV with her brow furrowed.

On this rather ordinary night, Ryuuji just couldn't help but look at Taiga because he had something he had to tell her. When Yasuko was still in the house, Ryuuji could not bring himself to say it with the three of them at the dining table, and Taiga was not going to let him mention *that*.

"Umm... you know... your dad... he's a strange person."

"This Baumkuchen, you really need to eat it layer by layer."

Taiga ignored Ryuuji and nibbled at the thin layers of the cake with her squirrel-like teeth.

"Nobody eats like that... Oh yeah, I had bagel earlier tonight. Your dad ordered a salmon bagel just like you did. You really do have the same interests as he does. You both like cheese."

"You're not eating yours? Then give it to me."

"We talked a lot... He seems to be worried about you."

Taiga snatched the layered cake from Ryuuji's hand, and chomped it down. She continued to ignore Ryuuji, and turned her face towards the TV, only her shoulders revealing her wavering.

"Hey, are you listening? Though I'm not in a position to say this, but shouldn't you at least meet up with your dad? Because lately... hey... are you even listening?"

I shouldn't be the one to tell her that. That was Ryuuji's way of thinking. *It should be done personally by her dad, but just to avoid Taiga shooting down everything before she even knows what's going on, I might as well mention it to her...*

"You dad... says he wants to live with you..."

"Are you an idiot?"

Inside the narrow apartment, only the TV sounds echoed throughout. Taiga didn't look at Ryuuji as she coldly said that while turning her head towards the side. *What was that about?* Ryuuji looked at Taiga's ears, which were sticking out from her hair. His voice began to grow stiff. *Why must she always be like this?*

"Stop eating already. I'm seriously talking to you here."

"And that's why I've seriously replied to you, 'Are you an idiot?' Is something wrong with that brain of yours?"

"I'm saying this for your own good!"

"Did someone ask you to do this? Stop trying to interfere in other people's family affairs!"

"What the!? Weren't you the one who asked me to meet with your dad!? You should at least hear my feelings about it! Or are you satisfied with just collecting the money?"

"Of course! I'm grateful to you, that's why I helped you wash the dishes. So it's over!"

"Don't be ridiculous! You should listen to me as well!"

"Shut up already! Stop trying to pretend like you know me very well!"

Taiga finally turned her head around, her eyes spewing flames of anger and irritation. However, when her eyes met Ryuuji's, the emotions in her eyes faded away, and the anger within cooled down as well.

"This conversation is over. How boring, I'm going home. Oh, let me tell you something, don't try to get moody about it. Wake me up as usual tomorrow. I am *not at all* affected by this level of unhappiness."

Ryuuji seemed to have made Taiga feel bored. Holding the half-finished Baumkuchen in one hand, she swiftly put on her socks with her other, and walked stridently on the tatami towards the entrance. Ryuuji followed behind her in order to stop her,

"Your dad's feeling very depressed that you've been ignoring him! Don't you pity him?"

"I'm even more pitiful!"

In the end it became a shouting match. *Why does she have to be so stubborn even now!?* Ryuuji was too surprised to say anything. Taiga looked contemptuously at Ryuuji, and then put her shoes and simply said, "See you tomorrow." as she left. She had really gone home.

Should I go after her? After wearing one slipper, Ryuuji hesitated again,

"Dammit!"

In the end, he didn't give chase.

Letting go of the doorknob, he locked the door and returned to his room realizing he was very angry, so angry in fact that he felt like kicking the tidy shoes lying at the entrance.

"Moron..."

Ryuuji cursed at the person who was no longer here, attempting to substitute his desire to kick things around with that.

With a dad that misses her, and him having expressed his worry about her life, as well as being sorry for what he's done, he's even decided to live with her. If Taiga was a bit more honest with herself, the happiness she's been looking for would be right before her eyes. But still she refuses to see him, and continues to indulge in her "I'm so pitiful for being abandoned " self-pittance. Absolutely ridiculous!

The happiness that Ryuuji could never find no matter how hard he tried was now openly discarded by Taiga right before his eyes. *Does Taiga really like to be so pitiful?*

The tense atmosphere remained in the entrance, with only Yasuko's slippers and Ryuuji's school shoes sitting

there looking rather lonely. No matter how much Yasuko and Ryuuji prayed and waited, *that* person would never come back.

Chapter 3

A general feeling of *Might as well not do anything* emanated from the classroom after school.

Forced to stay behind after classes, the students of Class 2-C kept coldly silent. The desks and chairs were pushed to the back of the classroom while they all sat on the floor, legs folded, looking reluctantly at Haruta, who was standing at the podium.

Were they looks of admonishment? No, even that wasn't too bad, because right now everyone just looked as though they did not want to get involved with anything. They just wanted to pretend as though nothing had happened, trying to get away from this foolish situation as quickly as possible. Everyone had their self-preservation instincts fully activated.

"Um... can you please pass this towards the back...?"

The culprit, Haruta, trembled and lowered his head, trying to avoid everyone's stares as he began to distribute the mysterious booklets. But no one was willing to take them from him. Haruta was then forced to come off the podium and personally hand a booklet to each student,

and to those that refused to take one, he simply placed the booklet on the floor beside their feet. As if they had all agreed beforehand, nobody opened their booklet, simply letting it lie on the floor. *If anyone were to open it, it'll be game over. Even if it's out of curiosity...* The somber mood permeated the classroom like incense in a graveyard.

"I feel that I'm responsible for this, so... I made these... The script... for the pro-wrestling show... It's got some serious battle scenes... so have a look..."

Nobody asked him to, but Haruta began his unnecessary explanation, even though no one wanted to know.

A most terrifying thing had happened. Class 2-C was really going to have to perform a "Pro-Wrestling Show". Whether it was her jealously of young people, or her anxiety getting the better of her, Miss Single (aged 30), unnecessarily using her influence as their homeroom teacher, submitted the crappiest proposal ever thought out to the School Festival Organizing Committee, bringing trouble to the lives of all involved.

To even mention writing a script in such a situation, where no one felt like saying anything, they gave a look of indifference, deliberately not looking at the cover of the stapled booklet. Even Haruta's good buddies Noto and Ryuuji were not in a forgiving mood either, as they both huddled grossly together by the corner of the classroom.

"A script written by Haruta, now that's scary."

"Yeah, looks like it'll be a mess..."

Ryuuji and Noto whispered quietly. Ryuuji's eyes moved around, shooting Haruta a dangerous, lightning-like glare that felt like it could strike him dead. Sensing Ryuuji's gaze, Haruta did not dare to look at him ... In truth Ryuuji was actually sympathizing with Haruta , thinking that he must be having a hard time as well... Although, was it even possible for Haruta to feel this good will?

Sitting in front of Ryuuji was Kitamura, who would always lead the class whenever there were activities in class. But now he looked tired, his glasses hanging from his nose as he mumbled to himself, "There's no way anyone will get excited... There goes my plan to get

everyone fired up for the festival..." Minori sat in front of him with her legs folded, while Taiga laid on her back, looking completely relaxed as she placed her entire weight onto Minori.

"Phew..."

"Ugh... Y... you're heavy... Taiga..."

"Phew... Ugh.. Min..."

"Did you say something? Wha...!"

Taiga had turned into an animal that was bereft of any thought, and squirmed about like a worm, leaving her scent all over Minori. Maya boldly laid flat on the floor, toying with the tip of Kitamura's shirt that stuck out from his trousers, while pointing at his underwear that was revealed above his belt and giggled quietly with the other girls. Even Nanako had brought out her mirror and comb and began to tidy her hair using her hairclips.

"Come on... Can you guys please get ahold of yourselves? We don't have much time..."

Haruta's teary voice echoed vainly through the classroom.

"Hey, Kitamura, say something! You're the class rep! You should be responsible for bringing up the atmosphere! Did you forget that it was me that saved you from getting your ass stabbed?"

"Ugh, for you to even say that, I guess I can't say anything. Then allow me to dance with you..."

Kitamura stood up despondently, and then it happened. Just what happened? Without a belt, Kitamura's trousers fell from his waist onto the floor.

"EHHHH!?"

"Kyaaa!"

For some reason, Maya, who had led the screaming, was holding the belt. Thanks to her little prank, Kitamura didn't even know his belt had been yanked off.

As Kitamura's underwear was exposed before everyone's eyes, the classmates all backed off as though hit by the shockwave created by an explosion. "Gross!" " What the hell do you think you're doing!?" Exclamations of disgust began to fly from all directions. "Why..." Kitamura grunted. "EEEEK!!!" Taiga yelled like a blowing

whistle, while Minori covered Taiga's eyes and lamented, "The trauma caused by the seaweed incident has returned..." "Whoa...!" Ryuuji maintained a distance from Kitamura, as his image of "Kitamura the Psychotic Exhibitionist" had again been reinforced. Ami simply said coldly, "The pervert has arrived."

Instead of bringing up the atmosphere, the class had now descended into chaos by the sudden appearance of a half naked man showing off his lower half. Haruta wrapped his head and laid it on the podium as Kitamura quickly pulled his trousers up, but the unforgettable image had forever been etched into everyone's memories.

"That's it! I'm going home!"

"This is so boring! It's a waste of my time!"

"I'm sorry, but I'm out!"

"Alright, let's all go home!"

The tense atmosphere that originally bound the class had snapped thanks to Kitamura's accidental exposure. Everyone grumbled as they stood up, picking up their

bags and moving their desks back to their original positions. It seemed like everyone was planning on going home now.

"W, wait a minute! Come on! Don't leave!"

No one took notice of Haruta's pleads, and simply allowed his empty words to echo in the air. Nobody had any idea of how this would end up.

It was at this moment...

"Oh my?"

Help came from the most unexpected person. Upon hearing that incredibly sweet voice, everyone stopped their plans to head home and listened intently. Some even quickly turned around.

"Hmm... Ahh... This seems rather interesting. Everyone gets their own character, it's even got dialogue as well. Hey~ Haruta-kun, I never knew you were this good~"

"A... Ami-tan...!"

The watery-eyed angel of Class 2-C, Kawashima Ami, had already turned her eyes from her childhood friend's half naked body towards the script.

"Hohoho, so I'm the lead character? Wow! I'm so happy~"

Ami stood beside Haruta and smiled gently, her squinting eyes forming two lines. Ryuuji, who was about to head home like everyone else, shot a glare that looked as though his eyes were reaching critical point towards Ami's suspicious smile. It wasn't as if Ryuuji was trying to scan at Ami's body with his X-ray vision, but rather, he was simply surprised.

Shouldn't Ami be leading the crowd in dissing this amateur's script? Tearing it up to shreds, burning it to a crisp, spitting on it, and spreading its remaining ashes on a decaying tree? She should be laughing haughtily in a high-pitched voice and saying, "Instead of wasting your time on such worthless stuff, wouldn't you be better off adoring Ami-chan's beauty? You ugly fools! Oh, and don't forget to keep your ugly eyes shut, because they simply can't withstand Ami-chan's good looks, so you'll have to rely on your imagination! What do you mean you can't imagine it? Just think of something beautiful

like a diamond or the stars in the sky! Ahahahaha!" Isn't she that kind of woman?

After her classmates, who were all about to go home, heard Ami look happy as she talked about it, one by one they turned back into the classroom and put down their bags, and surrounded Ami enthusiastically.

"You see? The script in this page is awesome!"

Ami merely gave things a little stir...

"Eh? Where? Where? Which page are you talking about?"

"Where's that?"

And everyone began going through the script that was handed to them...

"Hey... you're right... It's not bad..."

"Haruta, you jackass, don't get so cocky... Hmm, so I'm Ami-tan's Bodyguard C..."

"Whoa! Haruta can actually spell properly! The word processor's spelling checker sure is amazing now."

"Hey, I'm Ami-tan's Strategist! I've got quite a few lines!"

Ami smiled elegantly and glanced satisfyingly towards the whole class. Haruta was close to tears as he stared gratefully at Ami with adoring eyes, to the point that he would gladly lick her shoes if he was asked to. " Hee hee," Ami winked towards Haruta and said,

"Alright! Haruta-kun, let's do our best! Now shall we begin rehearsing?"

"Yeah...!"

"We'll need to set up the wrestling stage with duct tape , right?"

"Yeah...!"

"Give me all your money, okay?" "Yeah!" "Go and strip a piece of clothing, alright?" "Yeah!" "How about pulling out a kidney?" "Yeah! *The mood had developed to the point where no matter what Ami said, they were all gladly cooperative. It was only a while ago when the class nearly lost its bearings as a result of a series of bizarre events, and Ami had managed to manipulate things around with her hyper*

healthy smile." "This could turn out to be fun..." "What role are you playing?" Everyone now sat back on the floor, holding a copy of the script in their hands and looked all fired up.

Just what is her intention? thought Ryuuji, knowing all too well Ami's true mischievous nature, and couldn't help but look suspiciously at her.

"Eh? Ehhh? Huh~? What's wrong? Really, Takasu-kun, why are you staring at me~?"

"I'm not staring at you."

"Hmm...?"

Noticing Ryuuji's glare, Ami's eyes began to glimmer in mischief, seemingly having found something to make fun of him with as she said,

"The show hasn't started yet, so there's no need to get into character so quickly, Supporting Male Lead!"

"What? Supporting Lead?"

Ryuuji's mind went blank. "Heh heh!" He noticed Haruta sticking his tongue out and smiling, which was hardly cute at all. *What's the meaning of this!?* Ryuuji quickly opened his script copy...

"WHAT THE HELL IS THIS!!!???"

But Taiga had already yelled out before he could.

Under the leadership of Ami, the students of Class 2-C were getting along well with each other.

"Oh my~ this seems like fun..."

"The hell is this? What do you mean 'getting along well with each other'? And where are they supposed to get along well? At school? What about their homes? Won't their parents say anything?"

"It's been getting ridiculous since the moment Bakachi took over as leader."

Yet there were some that detested this peace, and they were the Incarnation of Evil - the Palmtop Tiger, and her henchman - Takasu Ryuuji the Delinquent.

"Oh no~ How scary~!"

"Why do I have to be her delinquent henchman!? I can't accept this!"

"Incarnation of Evil!? Me!? Why!? I wouldn't mind if it was Ryuuji, but this is going too far!"

`The Palmtop Tiger and the Delinquent made`

"Oh no~ This is bad~"

"Brainwash!?"

"By whom!?"

`The students of Class 2-C had turned into`

"Oh dear~ It got dissolved~"

"As if dissolving would work! Wouldn't they melt instead!?"

"What a giant plot hole... How stupid can you get?"

But the class applauded and sat outside the square-shaped wrestling stage that was set-up with duct tape, all praising Haruta the scriptwriter.

"Hey, it's not too bad at all. Good work, Haruta!"

"Simple yet dramatic enough, I never knew you had it in you!"

The nerve-wracking situation from a while ago was now totally reversed, and Haruta happily ruffled his messy long hair,

"Heh heh heh, really? I didn't know I was that talented . Seriously, are you guys telling me to become a writer? Oh man, this could be troublesome..."

"As if you are!"

Ryuuji quickly whacked Haruta in the butt with his script copy. He had originally wanted to kick Haruta with his foot, but he didn't want his shoe sullied by Haruta's butt and decided not to.

"OW! What was that for!?"

"That script is too crap for you to be even troubled by it, moron! Besides, what's all this got to do with wrestling anyway!? And why do I have to play the bad guy!?"

"Eh!? Takasu, I never knew you had such poor skills of comprehension. This script has everything to do with wrestling. First there's the 'assault on Class 2-C', and then there's 'Ami could only resist in vain' here, followed by ' the students of Class 2-C... causing mischief everywhere'. So is 'Ami's efforts of persuasion' and 'work together to chase away the Palmtop Tiger and the Delinquent'. Can't you tell by everyone else's reaction to it?"

There was nothing more humiliating than being lectured at having "poor skills of comprehension" by Haruta of all people. Ryuuji trembled, unable to withhold the anger that was burning within his body, his legs quavering as it consumed him. On the other hand, Ryuuji's boss, Taiga, the Incarnation of Evil, yelled,

"I'M HAVING NONE OF THIS!!!"

She roared while crouching on the floor like a wild beast.

"Aisaka-san, you, musn't, be, naughty~!"

"This has got to be a joke! Not only the Campus Queen , but this as well!? Why must I do all these ridiculous things!? This is all your fault! YOUR FAULT!"

"Oh dear~ How could you say such terrible things... ow ow ow ow ow!"

WHAM! Taiga had leapt onto Ami in a single breath, and elegantly locked up all four of her limbs.

"THIS, IS, ALL, YOUR, FAUUULLLTTT!!!"

"OW OW OW OW OW! That... hurts...!"

Taiga had performed a Cobra Twist on Ami. If Ami tried to wiggle, Taiga would simply apply her weight on Ami, causing her to yell in pain. It was a perfectly executed move.

"Wow, the Palmtop Tiger really seems fired up for it."

"Getting to rehearsal already, how diligent."

"That Cobra Twist is just brilliant! It's too perfect!"

"What a memorable scene... she's a priceless limited edition model!" (TL: As in robot model, not fashion model)

"WHOA!!!" Hearing everyone applauding her in awe, Taiga quickly let go of Ami and kicked her in the butt,

"SHUT UP YOU GUYS! I'm not doing this! This is just bullying! You all want to make fun of me by making me look foolish, don't you!? This is ridiculous! RIDICULOUS ! Forget it! I've thought about it, and it'll be alright as long as I kill you all!"

Her murderous intent was reaching critical mass as she swept the whole class with her fiery tiger eyes. She licked her lips while thinking, *Should I start from the right... No, I'll start with the nearest person.* Everyone quickly backed off and tripped frantically as they prepared to flee. Taiga set her sights on the group that fell together, charging up her energy on her feet, she was ready to pounce when...

"Aisaka-san! You mustn't! Palmtop Tiger, haven't you understood the situation yet?"

A calm and collected voice echoed throughout the chaotic classroom.

"What did you say!?"

It was none other than Ami. She was still wobbling from Taiga's Cobra Twist attack a while ago, and struggled to stand properly. Her eyes glittered with mercy as well as anger. She spread her arms like an angel , and stood in the way of the tiger that was about to bare her fangs. The blood lust in Taiga's eyes became even greater,

"You shut up, Bakachi! You were the one who started all of this!"

"OW! That hurts!"

SLAP! Ami refused to back off even after getting slapped by Taiga. She bit her lips while caressing her face and said,

"If hitting me is going to make you feel better, than go ahead! But if you do, then..."

"Alright! I'll do it!"

"Ugh!"

Taiga pulled the tip of Ami's nose, and as she fell forward, Taiga quickly flicked her finger on Ami's forehead and gave her the legendary Finger Flick. But no matter how many times she fell, Ami still stood up. She lifted her pure white face and even managed to make a soft smile,

"I... can't believe you actually did it... But now... you should be... feeling better... right?"

"The hell is this!? Stop being such a cocky chihuahua!"

Someone yelled, "Stop it Ami-tan! It's useless!" "You'll be killed by the Tiger!" But Ami simply smiled and replied, "I'll be fine!" and moved a step closer to Taiga, whose bloodthirsty eyes glared savagely as she approached. It was an intense moment, but Ami remained calm,

"Aisaka-san, I only have one thing to tell you. Afterward, you can do whatever you like... I did all of this just for you... because you couldn't get along with your classmates... who always look at you from a distance... Maybe they're scared of you... But I genuinely

wish that a violent midget... sorry, a poor girl like Aisaka-san would be able to get along with her classmates. That's why I used this chance for you to be in contact with them! How about it? In that empty heart of yours which knows only violence, can you feel the warmth given by everyone else?"

"What's with all this moody preaching? Who says I couldn't get along with the class!?"

"Ugh... we... get along... Yup... we do... get along..." The classmates shivered as they tried to appease her fury. Noticing this, Taiga turned her neck stiffly and said,

"W, why is everyone looking so scared?"

"You see? It's that simple."

Ami closed her eyes and shook her head, holding her hand up to motion to the whole class, "That's enough." The classmates obediently fell silent together. For some time, Ami had turned into a host of a long-running afternoon TV programme, completely manipulating the mood of the audience.

"Anyway, I wanted to tell you not to think so negatively... Alright? You understand now? Good, let us

start by opening to page 4 of the script, in Act 2 where Aisaka-san makes her awesome appearance. *Wham!* ' Entering with Takasu-kun from the right of the stage, she brainwashes the whole class.'"

"I-ALREADY-SAID-I'M NOT DOING THIS!!! I won't do it! Besides, I've never brainwashed anyone!"

"W, well it's not like you're really brainwashing anyone! You just need to pretend, that's all. Give it a try. Okay! Tiger! Your brainwashing line!"

"Wha!? So sudden... let me see... 'DIE!'"

"Seriously... forget it, can you not use 'Die'?"

"Huh, oh, there's dialogue... 'The Tiger roars as she enters the stage!'"

"Those are not dialogue... those are script instructions."

"What are script instructions?"

After some commotion, even Taiga had begun to listen to Ami's instructions, and the whole class was immersed in watching Taiga and Ami's passionate performance and applauded and cheered. Ryuuji didn't join in

because he didn't know his lines. *Wasn't she just questioning her a while ago? Why is she now suddenly acting according to the script? If Taiga were more steadfast in her stance, there might be a chance out of this, and now even she has...*

"DIMWIT!!!"

"SCUM!!!"

At the moment, Taiga seems to be enjoying her shouting match with Ami. *Oh well...* Ryuuji had completely given up. It seemed like everyone was enthusiastic about it, and moaning about it alone wasn't going to change anything.

All he could do now was be his obedient self. *If nothing can be changed, then there's nothing I can do. At the very least , I can't give everyone anymore trouble. Anyway, let's practice the part where I enter the stage...* And so Ryuuji began to read his script.

"Fight... fight... fight...! YOU-ARE-THE-KING-OF-"

"..."

Ryuuji gave an awkward look, so did the classmate beside him as he tilted his head.

"W... what are you playing?"

"Eh!? Oh, this? Well... even I'm not sure myself."

Minori was squatting by the side of the stage, excitedly observing the shouting match between Taiga and Ami. Although it was only the first day of rehearsal, she had already put on her make-up; she was wearing a bald cap, an eye patch, buck tooth, and a cloth around her waist, and was entirely immersed into her character.

"Haruta-kun says this is to make up for throwing me to the Morgue, so he arranged a pretty awesome character for me. He's even prepared a costume for me. Heh heh, I never knew Haruta-kun was such a nice person."

"Is that... so?"

Minori shyly removed her bucktoothed false teeth, and beamed brightly at Ryuuji while still wearing her bald cap and eye patch. It had been a long time since he last saw such a glowing smile that was as warm as the sun in

summer. Ryuuji's shoulders widened like flowers basking in the sunlight.

Minori's smile is indeed the source of all the liveliness in this world, so smooth and shiny... No, I don't mean her bald head is shining... Ryuuji found he could not move his eyes away from Minori.

"Takasu-kun, can I ask you..."

"H, huh!?"

And she's even speaking to me! Minori, who's been keeping a distance from me for some reason, is now willing to speak to me. I don't care if she's still wearing an eye patch and bald cap, if she wants to talk, go ahead. Ryuuji's eyes widened to the point of nearly splitting. *If possible, I hope she mentions that ... The towels that she promised to send to me once school resumes after summer vacation. I've been taking turn using those beautiful deep blue and khaki-coloured towels since then, washing them in soft detergent.*

"Amin's been behaving differently lately."

"Yeah, that towel, it's... huh? You're talking about Kawashima?"

Why is she talking about Ami? Ryuuji felt extremely depressed.

"Speaking of which... It does seem that way."

Ryuuji nodded and agreed, taking a quick glance at Ami, who was instructing Taiga on her acting. *Her beauty , pretentiousness and popularity were no different than when she first transferred...*

"She wouldn't have preemptively approached a crowd before. Normally she would always..."

Be more cautious.

Ryuuji realized he nearly said that, and quickly shut his mouth. For Ryuuji, this too was a sudden and unexpected realization.

So that's why, Ryuuji thought, *I always see Ami as always being worried or scared. To prevent the shell she has created from damage and shock, Ami would surround herself with walls, setting up mines everywhere in order to blow up any intruder that approached. This was her defense mechanism to prevent anyone from discovering her true self, but now, she had indeed changed a bit, though she's still wearing her pretentious mask, it's just that...*

"I already said that's not correct! Hmm... Could it possibly be that... Aisaka-san's... a bit dumb... You poor thing..."

"You have no right to criticize me, Bakachi!"

Ami stood in the centre of the classroom and teased Taiga while smiling maliciously. *I can tell that though her*

mask was a bit off and looked forced as she maintained it, she's still trying her best to integrate herself with the classmates. Ryuuji couldn't understand just what compelled her to be like that.

Now's not the time to think about such stuff. Besides, there are too many bystanders. Ryuuji kept his thoughts to himself. Rather, he looked skeptically at Ami, attempting to change the subject,

"I have no idea what that mischievous woman is up to. "

"Hey... how can you say that!? Amin's a good girl!"

Minori smiled and removed her bald cap, and gently knocked Ryuuji's arm. Ryuuji dodged her attack and said what he really thought,

"You too, you seem different from before."

"EHH!? M, m, m, m, me!?"

Does she need to freak out like that? Minori yelled suddenly as she stared at Ryuuji. Taking off her eye patch and reverting to her original form, Minori approached Ryuuji frantically,

"Really!? H, how have I changed? Is it for g, good?"

"You should know the answer to that question."

"EHHHH!? How am I supposed to know!? Just what's going on, I'm getting nervous. Why are you suddenly saying this, Takasu Boy?"

Weren't you the one keeping a distance from me for some reason!? Ryuuji did not say that, and simply picked up the bald cap Minori had dropped to the floor, casually dusting it off, and attempted to place it back on her head, while thinking *Our relationship should be able to allow us to be this intimate.*

"EH!?"

"Huh..."

Minori screamed like a crow that was being assaulted by a cat, shaking her head a lot with the bald cap tilted, and kept a distance from Ryuuji.

W, what just happened?

Was I too intimate? Maybe, but did she really have to back off so far? Ryuuji felt hurt inside, and maybe because he carelessly wore his expression on his face...

"Oh no, no, no, no... I didn't mean it that way! Really... um..."

Minori's way of comforting him was strange. She waved her arms and made one small step forward to approach Ryuuji. As their eyes met, even Ryuuji was lost for words, and could only look suspiciously at her.

"No, no, no, no... This, this, this... how should I say... well, you know."

Minori backed off again... *Whatever, in any case, please decide whether you want to put on or take off that tilted bald cap on your head.*

Ryuuji could only lower his head anxiously as he looked at Minori, he didn't even notice that someone was watching them.

* * *

For the past few days, Ryuuji and Taiga's relationship had grown even frostier. When they walked home together, even the rustling leaves blown by the autumn wind felt chilly.

Ever since "that night", there was hardly any cheerful laughter between them (not that there was any to begin with). Even then, Taiga would still go to school with Ryuuji every morning, and have dinner at the Takasu residence every night. She even accompanied Ryuuji to the supermarket on the way home. *If you're really feeling that pissed off, then don't hang out with me already!* Ryuuji thought, and even said so, but Taiga would always give her standard Taiga-like reply, "I'm not pissed off! I have no reason to! If you think I looked pissed off, that's because you keep on going about how pissed off I am!" But he could tell just by looking at how she ignored everything around her that she was indeed pissed off.

"What are we having tonight?"

"Yellowtail fish, we just bought that, remember?"

"How are you going to cook that?"

"By braising it."

"Braising it, huh?"

"Yeah."

Whoosh. An atmosphere that was colder than the freezing wind blew pass beneath their feet as they kept at within a metre from each other while walking forward. It was so cold that one could freeze.

It was already six after they finished their rehearsal for the school festival and shopping at the supermarket. As it was mid-autumn, the days were getting shorter, so the sky was already covered in a dark-gray blanket. The night was so silent that one would get goosebumps as the street lamps began to light up, one by one.

Ryuuji pulled up his gakuran collar, and upon seeing Taiga turn her face away, he turned his away as well. *You can be pissed off all you like, you selfish tiger. I don't have to*

waste my time getting pissed off with you. But even as Ryuuji averted his eyes, Taiga's fluttering hair would still enter his field of vision. Her soft, light-coloured hair looked a bit gray and fluttered, covering Taiga's face one moment, and then blown off the next. It moved so smoothly in tandem with her soft footsteps, that it seemed hard to catch its movement...

"OW! OW! OW! OW! OW!"

"Whoa!"

I caught it! Ryuuji couldn't resist grabbing a chunk of Taiga's hair with his palm. Taiga roughly pulled back her hair and yelled,

"What do you mean 'Whoa', you long hair fetishist! You asking for a beating!?"

"S, sorry..."

"You'd better be! You short-haired dog! Always with that mean-looking face, get lost already!"

Staring at Ryuuji, Taiga's eyes were burning with the flames of hatred. *I am indeed in the wrong here, but did she need to get this mad?* Taiga turned and walked away

furiously. Although Ryuuji didn't want to involve himself any more, he still chased after her... As for why, it was because his home was in the same direction.

Wouldn't things be much more simple if that old man had grabbed at her hair like I did? Ryuuji of course could not say this out loud, or he would definitely end up as the Palmtop Tiger's instant meal. So he could only look at her tiny figure from behind, and thought to himself, *What an idiot*.

It had been a few days since "that meeting", but it seemed that Taiga still hadn't got in touch with her father . Ryuuji couldn't tell her directly that "Your dad wants to live together with you..." because Taiga would blow her top if the word "dad" was even uttered... On the other hand, however, Ryuuji's unintentional silence would still be interpreted by Taiga as "What is it you want to say already!?", and then she would get mad and the matter would be forgotten.

"There's a limit to being stubborn..."

Ryuuji began to mumble to himself, thinking she wouldn't hear, but...

"Who you calling stubborn!?"

It was in only times like these that Taiga obtained superhuman hearing, picking up every single word Ryuuji said. She swung her bag and attacked him,

"So what!? What're you going to do about it!? I'm feeling pissed right now! If you have something to say, SAY IT!"

"OW! That hurts!"

Being hit by a hard bag, Ryuuji could say nothing besides yelling in pain. Seeing his house up ahead, Ryuuji pathetically escaped from the beechwood path that he walked on every day. Needless to say, Taiga chased behind rapidly like a cyborg.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE! I'VE HAD ENOUGH! The school festival as well! Why are all these annoying things happening lately!?"

"And it's my fault!?"

"Of course it is! Wah...!"

As she swung her bag with her tiny figure, Taiga's clumsy side showed again as she lost her balance and fell

towards the lid of the drainage by the sidewalk. Just as she was about to fall, she managed to grab a traffic pole placed to redirect traffic nearby with her hand, and attempted to steady herself, but...

"... WAAAH!?"

Is this her retribution? As the pole was not anchored to the ground, Taiga fell straight towards the pedestrian path, so did the metallic pole. Taiga's yell and the sound of the pole crashing on the ground echoed throughout the neighbourhood.

"Are you alright? You look pretty pathetic..."

"S, SHUT UP! Whose fault do you think it is!?"

"As if I have anything to do with that."

What a dummy. Ryuuji mumbled as he picked up the bag Taiga threw. No matter how much Taiga belittled him, whenever he saw Taiga fall down so embarrassingly , he just couldn't resist the urge to pick Taiga back up. He approached Taiga, who was looking riled-up and struggling while blushing furiously, and was just about to gave her a helping hand...

"...!"

"Ugh..."

"I, it's been a while..."

A hand slightly smaller than Ryuuji's, but slightly larger than Taiga's, had reached out and grabbed Taiga's hand before Ryuuji could.

Parked before Taiga's apartment block was a gorgeous convertible Mercedes, with its roof completely opened, basking in the beauty of this season.

From the silhouette standing with his back facing the setting sun, Ryuuji could tell that it was a short middle-aged man.

Taiga looked up, and her eyes glittered in a cold flare.

Although he looked small, he had the strength expected from a man in his forties. He pulled Taiga up with all his strength, letting her stand up and dust off the dirt from her skirt.

"I'm sorry, I've been waiting here for you. Well... I have something to... OW!"

"GET LOST, YOU STALKER!"

Bullseye.

Taiga's merciless ankle had thrusted deep into the forbidden zone between his legs. The silhouette, Taiga's father that is, knelt straight on the ground, unable to say anything as he twitched in pain. As a male himself, Ryuuji could only watch with a pale expression. He even felt a part of his own body hurting just looking at Taiga's father. As for the culprit, his daughter Taiga that is, she didn't even turn around to look at the tragedy that she had just caused.

"Ryuuji! Let's go home! It's too dangerous here!"

"You're more dangerous than anyone here!"

Ryuuji stood fixated, forcing Taiga to grab him by the arm and drag him towards the stairs leading to Ryuuji's apartment.

"H, hold it! Wait! W, w, wait! You just gonna leave him like that!?"

Ryuuji grabbed hard on the staircase railing, trying to support himself with his legs. Although it had nothing to

do with him, and the image of that "ball-breaking" execution was still etched in his mind, *But how can I let things end like this? I can't leave him behind like that! I can't go home with Taiga like that! This is serious! Something is happening! Your dad is really coming to pick you up! Today! Right here! Right now!* Even then, the terrifying-looking Taiga still attempted to drag Ryuuji along with the railing he was grabbing into the apartment...

"UGH!!!"

From the veins appearing on his forehead, one could tell that the railing which Ryuuji desperately clung onto was squeaking loudly. *If this goes on, not only will my shoulder get dislocated, but the whole house might fall apart.* With a determined look on his face, Ryuuji turned and grabbed Taiga's shoulders,

"Dammit! You troublesome fellow! You can only go so far with your stubbornness!"

"What!? How dare you speak so arrogantly for a dog like you!?"

He wasn't going to let go, even if it meant getting his face punched. Instead, he pulled in Taiga closer to him, and pushed her off-balance body towards the wall. Their

distance was so close that their breaths were overlapping , and exchanged froth as they began yelling at each other.

"Wha... What do you think you're doing!? Let me go!"

"You were the one who grabbed onto me first! I won't allow you to enter my house like that! Absolutely not!"

"WHY!?"

"Your dad's coming to fetch you! At least hear what he has to say! Just who do you think he is!? He's your dad!"

"No, he isn't! That's a stalker! I don't want to be with a stalker!"

"What is this nonsense!? Weren't you crying because you were abandoned? Be more honest with yourself! No matter what, you go and talk with that old man first! Look at his face!"

"A, are you on his side now? You betrayed me! And I thought only you were on my side... TRAITOR!"

"It's because I'm on your side that I'm saying this! This is all for you! Isn't this what you wanted!? Your dad's come to fetch you home! Didn't you want to go home!?

Didn't you want to go live with him!? The stepmother that you hated is no longer there!"

"W... why you, just what do you think you know!? I no longer expect anything from that person! It's all in the past! It's all over! I don't need that person anymore! When a person that's not needed suddenly appears, he'll only bring trouble! Who's going to be happy seeing trash that's been thrown away returning to their room!?"

"WHY YOU..."

Ryuuji's hands had unknowingly began to apply force on Taiga, and no matter how much her tiny hands struggled in pain or how much she yelled, he still refused to reduce his strength,

"He's standing there waiting for you to return. Is that person really just trash to you!? Do you know that no matter how much I hope for it, my dad will never return. .."

No...

I should never have said that...

Putting my own situation with the situation at hand is just too egotistical.

"..."

Ryuuji bit his lips and let go, backing off some distance away from Taiga, releasing the heated breath that was close to burning as he muttered repeatedly, "This is for Taiga, this is for Taiga..." *What the, I've actually said it.*

By getting Taiga, who had no relation to him, to attain her happiness, Ryuuji was merely using her to fill up the void in his heart caused by being abandoned for the past 17 years. He knew very well that he was saying this as a lame excuse to console himself.

Maybe I really am a boring and nosy stupid dog.

Accompanied by the loss in his heart, Ryuuji lowered his head in shame. He rubbed his eyes regretfully, unable to make any sound due to his throat choking up. He felt so shallow that he even wanted to spit his own innards out. *If Taiga were to slap me like she used to, then I wouldn't feel such self-pity right now.*

However...

"... That's enough... I understand now."

Taiga's voice still contained anger, but she still reached her hand and gently touched his lips which he had bitten till blood trickled out. Ryuuji held his breath at the touch of her cold and soft fingers.

Taiga's fingertips slid down his face and grabbed his chin, which was unable to say anything, and lifted up his pathetic face just like that. Her sharp glare looked fearlessly at Ryuuji and said,

"Since you say that... Then so be it, so stop making such a face."

Grip! Taiga clutched onto Ryuuji's face and forcefully pulled him up.

"Taiga..."

"Didn't you say it's a good thing? I'll make it a good thing... No matter what I really think about it, if you say it that way, then I have to treat it as a good thing."

Taiga furrowed her brow as she released her fingers from Ryuuji's face, and slowly squinted her eyes.

"I... I..."

"Don't say anymore..."

Taiga caressed his face with the back of her hand like a cat.

The knees that were close together were now moved apart.

Taiga placed her palm on Ryuuji's stomach and pushed him off, and slid her tiny shoulder from under his body.

Ah, couldn't grab her... That was what Ryuuji thought.

Taiga's shoulders, hair, and skirt fluttered like the fallen leaves on the ground, her hair wagging softly like the tail of a beast returning to the forest before Ryuuji's eyes. He subconsciously tried to grab her, but he could not grab anything, and his body felt exhausted by the emptiness in his hand. *I see, I no longer need to grab onto Taiga, and bring her here.*

Finally free, Taiga ran down the stairs like a bullet out of pistol, and towards the middle-aged man standing by the door of his imported convertible and said something.

Looking surprised, the man turned and faced Taiga, at this moment, there was no need to say anything anymore .

Trembling slightly, he embraced Taiga tightly, leaning his face on her shoulder and nodded non-stop. Taiga started out looking a bit reluctant, but gave up resisting in the end, and gently patted the man's back and relaxed herself, before finally throwing herself into her father's embrace.

Upon seeing this, Ryuuji slowly climbed back on the crummy old steel staircase and muttered "Thank goodness, all is good, all is good..." like an old man.

"Ryuu-chan..."

"Whoa!? You gave me a fright!"

The door suddenly opened and Ryuuji found his mother sticking her head out to welcome him back. Yasuko did not have any make-up on, and she was wearing Ryuuji's junior high PE T-shirt.

"Why are you dressed like that? You're still not prepared yet? You've got work today, right?"

"Yeah... but I heard some noises just now... D, did you get into a fight?"

Yasuko, without her make-up, furrowed her brow and clutched her chest worryingly.

"No, I didn't."

It seemed like Yasuko was startled by him and Taiga shouting outside earlier, and had eavesdropped behind the door. Her worried face, which hardly looked like that of a woman in her thirties (not to mention the mother of a high school student), was close to tears as she dilly-dallied around the entrance.

"Alright, let's go back inside."

Despite the urging of her son, Yasuko still stuck her neck out and took a peek outside, as though she was going to go out like that without wearing a bra and wearing only slippers. Placing his hand on her shoulders, Ryuuji roughly pushed her back into the apartment.

"We really didn't get into a fight, so don't worry and get to work already. It's after six now, I'd better prepare dinner as well. Go comb your hair, it looks messy."

"You're right... but, what about Taiga-chan? Is she going to change and come over?"

"She won't be coming today."

"EHHH!? Why not!?"

How am I supposed to answer that? Ryuuji thought while elegantly tidying up his surroundings. He swiftly piled up the mail-order magazines that Yasuko was reading, and placed them into the spot designated for recycled trash before Yasuko ordered anything funny from them. He then picked up her empty mug and quickly gave it a wash in the marble sink, as well as greeting Inko-chan that he was home. Within a few minutes, the narrow living room was reverted to the tidy state it was in that morning.

"No reason, and it's not really that bad."

Ryuuji's answer was quite laid-back.

"Yes~ it's bad! If Taiga-chan doesn't come, Ya-chan will get lonely~! We're a family~! Wouldn't Ryuu-chan get lonely as well~? It's no good if Taiga-chan won't come, so go get her~!"

Unable to agree, Yasuko sat on the cushion and rested her head on the short table, sticking her cheek on the surface like a teenage girl while twisting her body and pouting "I don't wanna!" Ryuuji took a glance at her with the corner of his eye, he entered his room and said,

"For Taiga, this is the best outcome. And it's not like she won't be coming anymore... I think."

Biting the sleeve of her PE T-shirt, Yasuko continued to hug the short table. She simply moved her large eyes and stared at her son as she asked,

"Really...? The best outcome...? Is that the best...?"

"Yeah, it's the best outcome."

Ryuuji wasn't lying. He put down his bag in its regular spot, placed his cell phone on the charger, and took off his gakuran jacket.

"This is the best for Taiga. The main reason she comes to our place was originally to prevent her from starving, but now that problem has been solved, she won't be coming... That's how it should be."

"What is as it should be~?"

Ryuuji hung his jacket on the hanger, sprayed some anti-mold spray on it as usual and then placed them into the cupboard in a clean-cut fashion. At the same time, he was thinking about how to cook the yellowtail fish he had bought. *Maybe I'll have one piece as tomorrow's lunch.* After deciding what to do with the ingredients, Ryuuji's thoughts gradually became clearer.

"Taiga's dad is downstairs right now. He wanted to get a divorce with her stepmother, who she didn't get along well with, and live with her again. Isn't that a good thing ?"

Ryuuji explained clearly and concisely.

"Hmm..."

Unexpectedly, Yasuko didn't seem to agree. She widened her large childish-looking eyes, and looked at Ryuuji who had just changed and emerged from his room,

"I just feel that her dad seems a bit self-centered..."

"What do you mean?"

"Well... I just feel that way~"

Mincing her words, Yasuko seemed like she thought of something and didn't want to continue. "Forget it." She shrugged, and walked to the bathroom in her PE T-shirt and prepared to go to work, and said in her usual care-free tone, "Ya-chan has no right to comment on other people's dads~." Ryuuji could only stare at his mother's back in silence.

Upon hearing his mother calling Taiga's father " self-centered", Ryuuji couldn't answer back.

But still, it's great that Taiga is able to return to her dad... was what Ryuuji thought.

He remembered something that happened long ago, when he was much shorter than he was now, and was always looking at Yasuko's back.

That morning, Yasuko suddenly said, "Let's take a holiday from the kindergarten!" And the two of them went traveling by train. After changing many trains, they arrived at an unfamiliar place. Ryuuji felt tired, so Yasuko bought an anpan from the platform store for him. Coming out of the station gates, Yasuko held Ryuuji's hand and arrived at a residential area with plenty of old large houses lined up beside each other. After turning around countless similar corners, they came to a park bench and sat down. During this time, Yasuko would stand and stare at a house surrounded by pine trees. After many hours, she would still stand and look at the second floor windows which could be seen from there. " Mom~" Even when Ryuuji tried to call her, she still would not move. Ryuuji called her again, "Mom~" And still Yasuko did not respond. So Ryuuji thought it better not to call her, and the two of them went silent just like that. It was soon evening before they knew it, and when night came, Yasuko finally turned around and smiled, " I'm sorry." And then they held each other's hands and returned to where they used to live.

At that time Ryuuji had no idea what was going on, but thinking back now, he realized that was where Yasuko's family lived. That time was when the Takasu family was in a tight situation financially. In order for Ryuuji to attend kindergarten, Yasuko had to work from day until night, and got very ill as a result. He didn't know what illness it was, but for some time she had to regularly visit the hospital. Ryuuji would often be all by himself in the hospital nursery for hours back then.

This is unbearable, I want to go home, but I can't, and I couldn't... Yasuko, who was only twenty back then, hesitated for hours as she looked at the window of her family house, while holding the hand of the forbidden child, unable to return.

Poor Yasuko, So thought that forbidden child. That girl was around the same age as Ryuuji was right now. *Just how did she see the husband that did not return, and the home that she could not return to? Did she ever wonder which choice was correct, and which choice was wrong?*

Did she ever regret it at all?

"Ryuu-chan~! Ugh! There's no more hair-gel~!"

"We've still got some back-up! It's under the sink!"

... She must have.

Standing inside the kitchen, Ryuuji opened his shopping bag and took out the three pieces of yellowtail fish with his just-washed hands. With the skin facing downwards on the chopping board, he began to season the fish in an exquisite way, while at the same time pouring a cup of sauce, sake and seasoning as he prepared the miso soup. There wasn't any need to cook any rice, as there was still plenty in the refrigerator.

Ryuuji hoped he could help her as much as he could, because she could not rely on her parents, and so could only rely on her son. Ryuuji only hoped she would be glad that he's around, and not regret the choice that she made. In that case, he could comfort the sadness within himself... That was what he had hoped all along.

Thus Ryuuji did not wish to see another girl facing the same sadness as he had. When he saw her running off, he kept on repeating the same words over,

This is the best outcome. They've been apart for so long, so it's not possible for them to get together right away, but they could take things one step at a time.

This definitely is the best outcome.

Chapter 4

"Yeah, whatever."

Taiga turned her head after replying. *Couldn't you be a bit more honest with yourself?* Ryuuji could only helplessly look at the side of her cheek.

It was a few days after the Takasu dining table had reverted back to being used by only mother and son. As autumn encroached day by day, the temperature this morning was particularly chilly.

"Anyway... Brrr~ It's cold~"

The autumn breeze blew over Taiga's hair, causing her to shut her eyes and scrunch her shoulders. Ryuuji had to button the top button of his gakuran jacket, which was usually unbuttoned, and inserted his hands into the pockets. The fallen leaves added a new texture to the path. Soaked by a small drizzle during dawn, the leaves stuck to the tarmac road. Under the scent of the wet fallen leaves, the moment the breeze stopped blowing, one could feel the warmth of the sun on their skin,

causing one to breathe deeply. It was only now that one would feel cold, but once it reached noon, the sun would become warm again due to the remaining summer heat.

Ryuuji quickened his pace, walking shoulder to shoulder with Taiga ahead. Matching her footsteps, their shadows, which contrasted in length, were now side by side.

"It's not that cold as long as there's no breeze... Well, I have an idea of the whole picture, but how do you plan on taking care of Kawashima? The normal methods wouldn't work, would they?"

"I've already prepared the 'bait', something very good. Though for Bakachi's sake, it's a bit of a waste."

Taiga held up her shopping bag, and showed Ryuuji a small, elegantly wrapped box inside.

"Oh, is that the dessert from that restaurant yesterday?"

"Yup. I'm gonna brutally increase her calories. Since it's from a famous store, she'll definitely like it... If I give

her this, and then 'ask her for a favour'... Ugh! Just thinking of having to ask that Bakachi for a favour makes me wanna puke!"

"Okay, okay... hohoho..."

While comforting Taiga, Ryuuji couldn't conceal the fact that his mouth was forming a grin. Taiga's brows went up, and then she swung her cloth bag toward Ryuuji's butt.

"OW!"

"What're you laughing at!? You look disgusting! Why're you grinning stupidly like Bakachi!? You droopy dog!"

"Who you calling a droopy dog!? And when was I laughing!? Hohoho..."

"You *are* laughing right now!"

Can't help it, really. Who asked you to be so dishonest with yourself? After she said "Yeah, whatever", Ryuuji waited to see how long she would put up her stubborn resistance; it was impossible not to find it funny. Concealing his ever-widening grin, Ryuuji dodged

Taiga's attacks with her bag while moving forward in a dreamy way on the road filled with the scent of fallen leaves. Taiga fumed as she yelled,

"Forget it! You definitely were laughing! You were laughing at me! Who cares about that!? That's right! I wouldn't care! It's too stupid to ask that Bakachi for any favours! I give up!"

Taiga stormed past Ryuuji. This time, it was his turn to chase her.

"Hang on! I wasn't laughing at you at all! My bad, I was just joking! So stop being so stubborn and ask Kawashima nicely, since the show's going to start tomorrow."

Taiga stopped suddenly, and glanced at Ryuuji with her eyes opened wide as she muttered,

"Oh yeah... it's tomorrow..."

"You see? Even I'm feeling very nervous about it. How time flies, it starts tomorrow indeed."

They were about to be late for class, and yet they're still lamenting about how time flies by so quickly. That's

right, the school festival will begin tomorrow. As they were busy rehearsing everyday, the festival has come upon them before they even knew it. After all, there's still a lot that needed to be done... from rehearsing, making of props, and selecting costumes. Besides, they still need to set up the all-important stage after classes.

"We don't have much time, so you can't really say ' whatever' to it anymore. If you want your dad to see your crucial appearance tomorrow, you've got to get Kawashima to help."

"I already said it's no big deal..."

Taiga began walking forward again, her voice becoming softer and softer. Ryuuji knew Taiga didn't really think it wasn't a big deal. Taiga's "no big deal" actually meant "really big deal", and was also a "really big deal" for Ryuuji - He had already decided to improve Taiga's relationship with her father, no matter what.

"Your dad's been working hard as well. Since that day, he'd pick you up every night to have dinner in some restaurant, and then bring you home. Now he's even planning on dressing up as a high-school student to attend some useless public school festival."

"I already said I don't care. Do you think I could forget everything that's happened and believe him just because of these minor things? Umm... I only said I'm fine just spending some time with him. Besides, the restaurant last night was quite good..."

Ryuuji didn't say anything else, and simply looked at Taiga. Getting Taiga to agree to "spend time" with her father was a massive improvement from kicking him in the nuts. *Seems like the effort Taiga's dad put in didn't go to waste, thank goodness...* Ryuuji really wanted to applaud the both of them.

But the amount of effort that geezer was willing make just to win back Taiga's trust was truly amazing. For a man with such an occupation and status to be willing to brave the weather just to have dinner with his daughter, the time spent with her just seemed so much more important.

One night, a section of the road between Taiga's apartment block and Ryuuji's house was under public works and was off limit for cars, Taiga's father sent a phone message to Ryuuji, *"Could you please come and pick Taiga up? Since the car couldn't come in. Good thing I asked for your number before!"* ... This father was so protective of

his daughter that he wasn't willing to let her walk a few metres in a dark alleyway. Wearing an attractive red V-neck vest and a checkered suit, he stood by Taiga's side under the dimly-lit streetlamp and waved his hand while smiling. His overly cheerful smile caused Ryuuji to forget the hassle of having to come out to pick Taiga up, and unknowingly smiled in response. *He really is a gentle geezer*, though his daughter would quickly yell at him, " You're too slow!"

As he reminisced of that scene, Ryuuji had an urge to smile, but quickly repressed that urge in the nick of time. He took another glance at the curl on Taiga's hair... He wasn't interested in people's hair curls, but it was that from Ryuuji's height, all he could see was Taiga's hair curl and the tip of her nose.

"So your dad's going to come to the festival this Saturday, and then spend the night at your place? This would be the first time he'll be staying the night, right?"

"Yeah, the first and last time. If it wasn't for the fact that we have something to do on Sunday, I wouldn't want him living there, it's too bothersome."

Taiga looked up toward Ryuuji, and flicked her hair with a blank expression.

"Something to do?"

"Yeah, the estate agent's coming to assess the value of the apartment that morning."

"Assess the value."

Like a parrot, Ryuuji repeated what she had said, though not even a parrot would be interested in such a boring conversation. Ryuuji never considered such a possibility, but as he thought about it...

If she's going to live with her dad, Taiga wouldn't need to live in that apartment on her own. Since that hateful stepmother's gone, she finally has a home to return to.

"B, but... do you really need to move? Since your current place's quite close to school... Couldn't your dad just move in with you?"

Ryuuji tried to say what he really felt as nonchalantly as possible, trying to conceal the shock hidden within his heart.

"He said it'll be too crowded for two people to live there."

"Is that so..."

So she's really going to move...?

A breeze tingled Ryuuji's neck. Trying to ignore the chilliness, he attempted to calm his trembling heart and said,

"Hold it. Are you kidding me? Your living room is so much bigger than my place!"

Ryuuji toyed with the curl on Taiga's hair, but quickly went into defensive mode, preparing to parry off the Palmtop Tiger's fierce counter-attack, but...

"There's nothing worth remembering in my old house, so I didn't want to go back. I too felt that we should just live together in that apartment, but Da... that person was already looking for apartments, saying he wanted a penthouse... We even went to have a look on the way back after dinner a few days ago. Though we only saw the outside, I thought it looked rather normal... But I guess it'll do."

Surprisingly, Taiga merely muttered to herself as she walked silently beside Ryuuji. Right now, she was completely ignoring Ryuuji and thinking about other stuff.

Taiga's mind was now occupied with everything concerning her father.

Spending dinner with him every night, not being resistant to the idea of living together, not feeling terrible either... It wasn't just her dad who's putting in the effort, but Taiga too is receiving his efforts with open arms, working hard to once again trust the dad that she used to hate. Yeah, upon hearing her dad say he would come to the school festival, she would even contemplate asking her rival Ami to switch roles with her, and play the 'good guy' for once.

This is good.

Ryuuji repeated those words within his heart, and forcefully squeezed out a smile. *This is good.*

"What now? So you are laughing at me."

"I already said I'm not."

"Like hell you aren't... You're laughing evilly! Forget it, you stand here for 30 seconds while I go off with Minorin . You can move again once we're out of sight... Eh? Minorin's not here? This is strange, is she late?"

"I think we're the ones that are late..."

"How could it be? I didn't oversleep today... No way!? Oh no..."

Looking at his watch, time did indeed fly faster than one would imagine. Ryuuji was so stunned he nearly jolted. Now was not the time to chat idly, so they both began running under the beechwood path that was dyed by the fallen leaves into hues of red and yellow. On the way, Taiga slid and tripped, but quickly stood up just with her sheer determination. *Her dad's protective thoughts are probably watching over his clumsy daughter, no doubt.*

In deep thought, Ryuuji looked up at the autumn blue sky.

"Ryuuji! Why are you still dragging your feet!? If you decide to give up and just walk normally to school, then I can stay with you, since I'm out of ideas anyway!"

"Are you an idiot!? ...Just keep on running already!"

* * *

"If you like it, I'd like you to have it."

Upon hearing this, Ami looked at the object that was handed to her, and stayed silent for a few seconds,

"Ugh, what's in it? Some sort of an animal carcass?"

Ami gave a genuinely disgusted look as she raised her thin brows. After school had ended, the tiny corner in the chaotic classroom where the two of them stood had turned into an air pocket, instantly creating an icy and hostile atmosphere. Undeterred by this, Taiga continued,

"Don't be silly, Bakachi. No way would I ever give you something like that."

Taiga reluctantly shrugged her shoulders, swallowing everything that she could use to retaliate against Ami as she insisted on giving the object in her hand to Ami. That object was an elegantly wrapped box, or "bait" as Taiga had put it. She was forcefully stuffing the box into Ami's chest, and no matter how much Ami would push it away , she refused to give up.

"This is for you. Just take it already, Bakachi..."

"No, I don't want it. For you to actually give me a gift, you must be plotting something."

As expected from the Queen of Deviousness, Ami was extremely perceptive when it came to sensing anything suspicious. She had guessed correctly, as they were up to something. Even Ryuuji, who was standing beside them, couldn't help but mutter, "What amazing perception."

"No, no, I'm not plotting anything at all."

Taiga waved her arms widely before her, and widening her eyes gently like her father, she smiled and said,

"I just wanted to give this to Bakachi, since I believe you'll like it."

"Eh...?"

Taiga said so in the voice of a gentle girl, causing Ami to look at her with some disgust, though she was no longer dodging Taiga. She reluctantly turned her frowning face, and decided to hear Taiga out. *Okay! Do it ! Now's the chance!* Ryuuji whispered as he backed Taiga up as well.

"I suggest you not assume everyone is as double-faced as you are. It's better to assume the best of things."

Wha!? Why must you suddenly say such nonsense!? A fit of rage flashed through Ami's face, which became as red as a rose,

"Why you... just when I was about to shut up and hear what you had to say..."

"Just take it already, Kawashima."

Ryuuji decided to intervene, with his back toward Taiga, and gave Ami an unusually gentle smile - This only added to Ami's suspicions that something was up.

"There's some really good stuff inside, so just accept it. I guarantee that you'll be happy once you see what it is."

But not even Ryuuji's kindness could persuade Ami,

"Huh? What's this got to do with you!?"

Now get lost! Ami waved her hand to motion Ryuuji to go away.

"Even though you're right..."

"I'm definitely not taking any gifts from the Tiger."

Ami turned her face to one side and ignored them. Ryuuji and Taiga now found themselves suddenly facing a difficult obstacle as they looked at each other.

Inside the classroom after lessons, though the showdown between two pretty girls plus one ruffian-looking student was getting explosively intense, no one was paying any attention to them. This was because the whole class was busy preparing for the school festival the next day. Laughter and yelling could be heard everywhere as the rehearsal for the pro-wrestling show was entering its final stages. Haruta

was completely in director mode as he gathered the classmates from the gymnastics club to perfect the backflipping choreographs, while constantly complaining, "No good! Try again!", only to be ignored by everyone. It felt as though he would soon be finished off by the Shadow Brigade himself.

The sky outside the window was getting darker. It wasn't just Class 2-C that was making all the noise. The classes next door and opposite of them were also the same. Every student was busy building their woodwork, carrying their ladders, or dressing up in all sorts of maid costumes. Kitamura wasn't in the classroom, as he was busy going around the school while doing preparation work for the Student Council. It seemed like Class 2-C weren't the only people that were interested in the prizes offered by the Student Council this time. Besides the third year exam classes, nearly every class was taking part in this competition.

Amongst this busy cyclone in the school...

"I, I think it'll taste great, so try some!"

Ryuuji decided to take a lower profile in an attempt to improve the situation,

"Food~?"

Though it was still not enough to attract. The lead actress, who was taking a break, twisted her cute face, and glared at the main villain and her lackey and said,

"This is getting even scarier... Now I'm definitely not taking it."

She flatly refused the gift from her nemesis, not even wanting to receive it. *Taiga probably went too far with her everyday antics, but I never thought it would come to this. Looks like I'll have to do this myself...* Ryuuji continued to act as mediator,

"Just open it and you'll know what I mean. I assure you that you'll love it. C'mon, take it. Open the wrapping and see what's inside! Okay?"

Hearing Ryuuji persuade passionately, Ami thought, *Is this the Takasu Shopping Network?* And turned her head while looking suspiciously. She didn't want to let that box which seemed to contain food drop onto the floor, so she finally stretched out her white hand, and reluctantly took the small box. As she looked with a frowning face at the logo on the wrapping, she suddenly widened her eyes,

"Huh? No way!? Is it really *that* one!?"

Gotcha.

Taiga and Ryuuji exchanged glances. Ami ignored them and opened the wrapping, slowly opening the box,

"No shit, what is this!? Holy...!"

Ami exclaimed in a much softer voice than usual. Inside was a box of macarons made by a well-known French restaurant, which was famous for being notoriously difficult to get a reservation. The macarons were lined up as a beautiful rainbow.

"Lately my dad has been taking me out for dinner.The food at this French restaurant I went to last night looked really good, so I decided to buy something for you. I believe you'll like this, won't you?"

"With your dad? Dinner? At *that* restaurant?"

Ami's gaze, which was fixed on the macarons, was suddenly covered in darkness. Even her beautiful chin now looked a bit awkward,

"No way... What did you say? Not even me and my modeling colleagues have ever been there, so why is it that common folk like you and your dad get to go... You're kidding me, right? I see... no wonder you've been getting acne lately. It's because you've been eating all these nice things, huh?"

Ami's watery eyes pointed toward Taiga's chin, which indeed revealed a few red spots of acne due to eating so much good food. "Hmph!" Ami unreservedly wore her jealousy on her face as she said bitterly,

"Your dad, huh... I heard your parents were divorced? For you to live alone at such an age, you poor thing~ Oh my, I never thought you two get along so well!"

How rude to blatantly point out other people's familial affairs. If this were Taiga back then, she would definitely have hell freeze over, but today was different. No matter what people said, she seemed reserved. The heart of this queen tiger had already been stuffed with all sorts of exquisite French cuisine, wrapping around it like a layer of fat. As a result, any petty attacks made by the chihuahua were merely mosquito bites to her.

"Yeah, we get along well. Sorry to disappoint you."

Heh... Taiga smiled with the acne on her face as she gracefully dodged all attacks. Ryuuji muttered approvingly,

Taiga sure is amazing. She's hid her aggressiveness really well this time.

This is good... He nodded non-stop. *Yup. This is good, definitely.*

"Bakachi, why don't you try some?"

"Huh? You want me to eat these right here right now? Why? No way! My mouth would be dry. Though I'm still pissed at you, the macarons are innocent, so I'm going to take them home with a gracious heart, and enjoy them nicely with a cup of red tea... But, dammit... I still can't believe a midget commoner like you went there before me... I'm definitely gonna have to go there next weekend. .."

"Whatever! Just eat! Hurry up and eat! Eat! Eat!"

"No! You're annoying, you know that? What are you doing!?"

"C'mon! Just eat already~"

Taiga began to pout like a kid, and clung onto Ami, grabbing onto Ami's track suit, while kicking Ami's butt with her indoor shoes.

"Hey, stop it! Stop pulling my PE uniform! It'll stretch out...! And didn't you wear your shoes to the bathroom!? Stop stepping on me already! Ahh~! Enough already! I'll eat them! Okay!?"

Ami finally conceded to the unyielding Taiga, and tossed a piece of macaron into her mouth. Clinging onto Ami like a monkey, Taiga said softly,

"You've eaten it..."

And leapt back onto the floor, keeping her distance from Ami and stared at her until she swallowed the macaron. Dusting off her hands, Ami said,

"Alright, I've eaten, it's tasty, you happy now? Now get lost! Dismissed! You can really be a pain in the ass sometimes, you know?"

"You've eaten it! Now you have to do what I say!"

"Ah! So you *are* up to something! Damn... *cough cough*!"

Ami choked and went teary-eyed as she attempted to spit out the remnants of the macaron that she just swallowed, and pointed an accusing finger at Taiga,

"You're the most despicable person! Hey, Takasu-kun! Did you hear what she said? And I was thinking why she would be so kind as to give me a gift, I never thought you would be this kind of person!"

This is awful! Even though Ami said that, Ryuuji could only smile meekly, since he was an accomplice as well. He turned his head away from Ami's beautiful gaze as though it had nothing to do with him. Taiga approached Ami and said,

"Since you've accepted my snack, you will swap roles with me in tomorrow's pro-wrestling show. Just once will do, I don't want to be the villain, I want to be the good guy."

Taiga had finally said it. It was a most shameless, self-degrading request.

"Huh? Why!?"

"Ugh!" Taiga twitched her lips like a kitten, and probably felt embarrassed by now as she grabbed onto

Ami's track suit with her entire weight, as though she was wind-surfing,

"Tomorrow my dad's gonna come to the festival, but I couldn't tell him I was going to play the villain... I only said I had a lot of lines, and he assumed it was going to be a play... He even said since I'm the main character, then he'll definitely come..."

"But this isn't a play, and you aren't the main character ."

"Of course I know that. This is just a stupid pro-wrestling show thought up by that long-haired idiot! But I can't change that anymore! No matter what, he'll still be coming! So at least let him see me play the lead character! I couldn't tell him to not come!"

"Hmm..."

Rather than being moved, Ami's eyes were looking coldly at Taiga. Yanking her track suit back, she moved her lips, seemingly wanting to say something nasty, but she quickly swallowed it. After thinking for a while, Ami placed her finger over her lips and said softly,

"I see~ Is your dad going to watch the Campus Queen competition? Did you tell him you were participating?"

"Umm... yeah... though I didn't want to, but I accidentally spilled..."

Ho~ As though coming up with an interesting joke, Ami squinted her eyes as she smiled,

"That's fine... At least that'll ensure you'll definitely be participating in the Campus Queen competition. If it's only our class that's not cooperating, then it'll look bad on me as the host. Hmm, alright, we'll switch roles when your dad's watching. Sigh, since Ami-chan has to play the main character all the time, it's fun to occasionally play the bad guy once in a while. As for the excuse, I'll think of something to keep everyone in the dark. Besides, it's not like a 'father complex' like you would ever tell anyone why you would switch roles."

"Who you calling a 'father com...'"

"Al-right al-ready~"

This time it was Ami's turn to approach Taiga, bending down to look at her face and said in an unusually sweet voice,

"Speaking of which, what does your dad do anyway? From your description, I smell the scent of an aristocrat~ I can switch roles with you, but you're going to have to tell your dad that the host for the Campus Queen competition is your friend. Not to mention a model, as well as extremely cute, courteous and amazing! Just say a lot of good things for Ami-chan, let me create a good relationship with him. Huh? Why, you ask? Even if we won't meet each other during work, I could still establish good relationships with the people at that restaurant, call it networking if you will~"

"Uwah! How did I end up talking to this disgusting woman..."

"What's that you say!? I've already agreed to your request! How can you still say such things!?"

Deal... I guess?

Ami and Taiga were now yelling and running around the classroom like usual. Ryuuji could only stand by helplessly while watching them.

"Just remember to introduce me to your dad, get it!?"

Just when Ami had raised her voice...

"Taiga's dad...? What's going on?"

In preparation for tomorrow's show, Minori wiped her bald cap as she approached Ryuuji. *She's talking to me!* Ryuuji nearly leaped for joy like a puppy. Having restrained his own excitement, he managed to nonchalantly explain what just happened, while feeling puzzled at the same time, *Does she not know anything at all ?*

"That girl's dad said he's coming to the festival tomorrow. When Kawashima heard that, she insisted that Taiga introduce her to him, so that's why they're squabbling right now. I really don't know what she's expecting."

Just as he was about to continue his explanation,

"..."

Minori suddenly closed her mouth and held her breath . Her shining black eyes widened, merely gazing at Ryuuji who stood before her. The dimples on her seemingly round cheek were full of energy. *So cute.* Ryuuji was obviously relaxed as he thought that.

"W, what is it?"

After a few seconds, Ryuuji finally sensed something was not right. Minori seemed to have heard something very surprising, and was unable to speak. Her face had become stiff, as though it was petrified. Normally, no matter what happened, Minori would always solve things with her positive thinking, as she was an extremely optimistic and enthusiastic girl with a personality that shined as bright as the sun. *Was it because I said something strange?*

"W... why?"

Minori finally spoke, but her voice sounded anxious and uneasy for some reason.

"You ask me why but..."

Now even Ryuuji was speechless. *Just what's going on? Did I say something wrong?*

Minori quickly looked around, and then casually turned her back toward Taiga and Ami, who were now wrestling with each other, and cornered Ryuuji between herself and the wall before saying,

"Just why... Come on, tell me."

There was no trace of a smile on her face. Her brows were furrowed tightly, and she bit her lips with a serious look. This was the first time Ryuuji had seen her with such an expression, as he would've never thought she would make a face like this. Smiling cheerfully, making funny faces, and sometimes showing anxiety fitting for a teenage girl... Those were the emotions by Minori that Ryuuji knew of.

"Stop being so quiet. Tell me, what's Taiga's dad planning this time?"

"What's he planning? He's coming to the festival..."

"That's why I'm asking why he's coming!?"

Minori yelled suddenly in a loud voice, startling Ryuuji. Even Minori was startled by it, and quickly shut her mouth, allowing herself to calm down. She then opened her eyes again, and took a deep breath. Ryuuji now understood.

Minori was angry.

But upon understanding that, doubt had entered Ryuuji's mind like a flash of lightning. *Why is Minori suddenly getting angry? It just doesn't make sense. For some reason, it's too awkward.* He didn't know what this all meant.

Faced with a silent Ryuuji, Minori said in an anxious voice,

"I'm asking you, Takasu-kun, why is he coming? If you know the reason, please tell me. What's happened to Taiga? Why is her dad appearing so suddenly now?"

Minori's voice sounded almost mechanical. Ryuuji could hear her speak in a speed he wouldn't normally hear, and in words that seemed to admonish him. He didn't know the reason behind this at all, but as he couldn't ignore her question, he replied,

"Taiga's going to move in with her dad. I'm sure you know very well about their past, but lately, they seem to be making up as father and daughter again."

Ryuuji tried to remain calm, and said the facts that he knew.

A second later.

"..."

Minori couldn't say anything.

He could clearly see her chest puffing from under her uniform as she inhaled. Her face had gone pale as she opened her lips, which could not seem to exhale, but merely tremble helplessly. Her reaction was different from how Yasuko randomly ended the conversation back then. It seemed like she took it really hard.

"Are you okay? Hey, you look terrible, what's going on ?"

Although he was a bit hesitant, Ryuuji still gently placed his hand on Minori's shoulder. He wanted to hold onto it in order to cheer her up, however,

"What the hell..."

Minori's eyes could no longer see Ryuuji nor anything else. She trembled while shaking off Ryuuji's hand, tightly gripping her well-manicured fingernails in one hand, and holding onto her bald cap in her other hand, and said,

"What the hell is this!? Stop kidding me!"

Minori said something similar again. Ryuuji didn't know whom she was talking to. The next moment, Minori turned her back toward Ryuuji, and walked forward to look for Taiga.

"Hold it!"

Ryuuji found himself grabbing Minori's hand and stopping her. There was no romantic warmth as their skin came into contact. Minori turned her head, and shot Ryuuji what seemed to be a hostile glare,

"Takasu-kun, let go."

"Where are you going? What are planning to do? You're getting delirious now, can you please calm down? "

"The one who's delirious is Taiga."

This time it was Ryuuji that was rendered speechless.

"Taiga must have lost her mind, I need to wake her up. I have to tell her that she can't trust such a dad."

"Wha..."

Ryuuji was so shocked that he could feel his hair tingling and goosebumps growing all over him. *Calm down, calm down...* This time he was telling himself instead.

"Why must you say such words? Aren't you Taiga's best friend? Why do you have to say such mean words... Why aren't you feeling happy for her?"

"Happy? Me? What for? Taiga's dad appearing in such a moment, and she's actually believing the words of such a dad. How can I be happy with that? I can't just stand by and smile while my friend gets hurt!"

Are you saying I'm smiling and watching Taiga get hurt? It was a miracle that Ryuuji managed to restrain himself. *This is Kushieda Minori, the girl I like...* Ryuuji repeated

that thought as if it was a mantra. After stopping himself from yelling, he said in a calm voice,

"Isn't that a bit exaggerated? Though he may do things out of the ordinary, Taiga's dad is just a normal geezer that just wants to love his daughter and keep her happy. He may have made mistakes, and he has hurt Taiga before, but right now he's trying his best to make amends for his mistakes, and Taiga's doing her best to reciprocate those feelings. You're just a bystander, what right do you have to say such words? You don't even know anything.. ."

Ryuuji breathed deeply, attempting to keep himself calm. But Minori didn't even want to hear it, nor did she stretch out her arms, but rather squinted her eyes and continued to berate Ryuuji,

"Have you ever met Taiga's dad? You must have... that's why you're saying that. I get it, you want to throw Taiga into a burning pit... Takasu-kun, when you met Taiga's dad, did you open your eyes and look carefully? Are you even sure your eyes were open at all?"

"What? What's that supposed to mean? Of course I had my eyes open!"

"Forget it. I understand. There's no point talking to you ."

"What did you say!?"

Ryuuji's voice was becoming mute due to it being suppressed so hard.

"Stop talking as though you know everything! Why are you saying this!? Why aren't you feeling happy for Taiga!? The one who should have their eyes opened is *you*!"

Ryuuji had always believed Minori to be as bright as the sunshine, and so she should, more than anyone else, wish for Taiga's happiness. She should be wanting to congratulate Taiga and her father, wanting to be happy for Taiga who finally would have a family once more, wanting to see Taiga be happy with him, and smiling to him as she says "This is the best outcome."

The more he believed, the more he was hurt by the betrayal. That wound was far beyond what Ryuuji could comprehend, and just looking at it was enough to make his blood boil.

"That's because I don't trust her dad."

"Who are you to decide whether he should be trusted!? Shouldn't that be left to Taiga!?"

"That's why I'm going to tell Taiga not to trust him!"

"You stay out of this!"

"Well, it's got nothing to do with you!"

"It's got even less to do with you!"

How can she be so insolent!? How can she say such things!?

Ryuuji glared at Minori with eyes that looked as though they could shoot fire, though Minori was hardly intimidated, and refused to back down. As they glared at each other while catching their breaths, their classmates around them had begun to notice them fighting.

"What's going on with Kushieda? Why does it seem like...?"

"Was that Takasu yelling just now...?"

Amidst the murmuring, a startled Taiga looked at both of them, and it seemed like she only just discovered them

bickering. She widened her eyes in surprise and opened her mouth, looking back and forth between Ryuuji and Minori. Then she...

"R... Ryuuji!"

Ran to them.

"Minorin!"

This was the first time Ryuuji had seen such an expression on Taiga - an anxious expression peeking at their faces, trying her best to reveal a smile, and trying to resolve all that had just happened with it.

"Let's shake hands...!"

Squeezing between them, Taiga grabbed their hands and tried to make them shake hands. But Ryuuji's tightly clenched fist resisted, and when their knuckles came into contact, he reflexively shook off Taiga's hand and glared at Minori. Minori was no longer looking at him, and instead, merely stared at her own shoes.

Ryuuji didn't want to know what would happen afterward. No matter what people said, no matter what face Minori made, he wasn't going to care anymore, and merely said, "It's got nothing to do with me."

With his mind numb and blank, he decided to throw everything away, and bolted out of the classroom.

* * *

Those who didn't know Ryuuji saw him as a thug, a hooligan, or a serial offender.

Those who knew him saw him as a kind and gentle, yet serious person, and as a strange high school student that behaved like a housewife.

He was probably born with it, while others said he inherited it from his klutzy mother Yasuko, who had raised him since birth. Ever since he learned to think for himself, Ryuuji had been playing the part of son, professional housewife, and Yasuko's minder all at the same time, which explained why he was more independent than other kids. By suppressing his childish urges to pout, moan and be selfish for all these years, Ryuuji was able to become the man he is today. Like a willow, he had to be flexible enough to take in all that came his way, otherwise, with an unstable mother-son relationship, the Takasu family would have easily fallen into disarray.

On top of that, the hooligan-looking face that he inherited from his father also compelled Ryuuji to be calm and reserved.

Without even doing anything, people would simply assume he was a violent miscreant just by looking at him. They would be intimidated due to fear, and would even say some mean things to him, eventually excluding him from their circles. As he had experienced this often, Ryuuji was fully prepared for it. That was why he demanded himself to be more upright and gentle than

anybody, and he would not be angry or get involved in any argument no matter what happened, instead, living his life honestly. He believed that by doing so, there was bound to be someone who would understand him, and would want to befriend him. As long as he had friends who understood him, no matter what happened, they would always be there for him; no matter the situation, they would all know that deep down, he was a good person.

Before today, Ryuuji always understood that by being angry or irritated, the last person to suffer would always be himself, which was why he had never showed such emotions before...

"I feel like dying..."

Is this my punishment?

Between the two vending machines was an empty space about 50cm wide, and right now, Ryuuji had squeezed himself in that space while sulking and holding onto a can of iced coffee. As the temperature was less than 10 degrees right now, Ryuuji's fingers, which were wrapped around the cold can, were close to freezing.

He was angry, and did exactly what he shouldn't have been doing - he let loose his anger. Using all of his strength, he gave the innocent vending machine a hard punch. This ended up creating a dent in the machine, causing it to eject a can of iced coffee, which rolled over to Ryuuji's feet.

He could've put down the can, but his body felt numb, and he was unable to move his fingers. Besides, he more or less felt like punishing himself, so even if his fingers had lost all feeling, he still continued to hold onto the icy can.

It's all Minori's fault.

But, I yelled too.

If I could turn back time, could things be resolved? The problem was time could never go back, and that was why Ryuuji felt like dying.

He didn't know how long he had sat there for. It was quiet around him, and he couldn't feel the flow of time, nor could he think, as he didn't want to recall what had just happened.

If I die here... maybe Minori would cry for me.

"Hello. Mister. Dummy."

He suddenly heard a gentle voice.

"Leave me alone..."

Without even looking, just by smelling the perfume, he could tell who it was that was approaching with elegant footsteps.

"That gap is reserved for Ami-chan."

Ami crossed her arms and lowered her brows, casting a shadow over her starry eyes, while revealing a soft smile. She walked up toward Ryuuji, who was seated on the floor, and looked over his figure.

"Says who?"

"Says Ami-chan. Now come on. Get on up, move."

With fingers as slim as bones, she grabbed onto Ryuuji's icy hands. The soft touch did not contain any mischief as Ami pulled Ryuuji up from the gap with all her strength. She then seated herself into the gap.

"See? Ami-chan's body fits just fine in here. This place is indeed reserved for Ami-chan."

"Heh." Ami smiled in satisfaction. Ryuuji had no choice but to sit opposite of her with his legs crossed. *This feels incredible. Even when I'm looking at Ami's haughty looking eyes and her mischievous smile, I hardly feel bad at all. No matter how down I look, this girl would never sympathize with me...* It was also because he knew that, he was actually able to relax and continue to feel depressed, and not worry about her finding out.

"How's Kushieda?"

"What's with this can of coffee? I'm not really into canned coffee, you know. Oh, and Minori-chan's gone home already."

"No way! ...Oh man..."

Ryuuji buried his face into his knees. "Ah... I'm so screwed." While moaning, Ryuuji finally understood the true meaning of the word "despair" - no hope, no tomorrow, no future.

"Well, you brought it upon yourself, yelling at the girl that you like."

Ami said while pulling the can open, but little did she expect for Ryuuji to fall for her words so easily.

"That's Kushieda's fault! It's because she said some really mean stuff that things have come to this!"

"Hmm...? Well, I don't know what exactly you were arguing about, but you don't normally get into a fight, do you? Besides, the person you were arguing with is a girl, and to top it off, it's the girl you like."

"Shut up... It doesn't matter anymore. I was really angry, I didn't want to believe that she could... That's just terrible. Only now do I know what kind of person she is, I can't believe she'd say such things..."

Ryuuji realized he was pouting, as well as abandoning all dignity he had as a man, but he had already said what was said, and could not pretend nothing had been uttered.

"Oh dear, you look pathetic. Can you not tell me these things? I'm not interested. Do you seriously think I'm gonna stand by your side and sympathize with you?"

"Yeah, you're right."

Ami toyed with her eyebrows with an indifferent look and drank her canned coffee. Ryuuji said nothing for a while, and just looked at Ami's throat as she sipped down the coffee.

"Care to bring my bag over? I feel like going home right away."

Since he had already let Ami see his pathetic side, he might as well go all the way.

"No way, man~"

It was expected that she would make that mean look and reply with that disdainful attitude.

"I'm just here to take a short break before returning to the classroom. You can come back with me."

"Gimme a break... Everyone's worked so hard to spice up the mood, only to be ruined by me..."

"You may be right, but I've smoothed things out and told everyone to ignore you guys, so I guess it should be okay, as everyone's gone back to their rehearsals."

"Smoothed things out...? You?"

"That was nothing for me. I'm not like that midget Palmtop Tiger, who only knows how to get her fur standing straight up and intimidate the people around her."

"Didn't she go home with Kushieda?"

"She did run after her, but she then tripped and got left behind by Minori-chan. It looked like she had hurt her ankles and was close to tears, so Nanako-chan had to take her to the infirmary. She's probably back in the classroom by now."

Ryuuji felt like he was witnessing the whole scene himself as he gave a sigh. *And just whose fault was it that led to this?* A stereo-like effect formed in his head as he thought that, as on one side he could hear himself yell, "

It's Minori!" while on the other side, he said sheepishly, " It's me?"

But Ryuuji could not find himself to accept what Minori had said because he couldn't understand it at all. Even if he had prayed for time to go backwards, and even if it did, he still couldn't agree with Minori's words. No matter how much he wanted to go back, no matter how much he would regret and hate himself for it, he would still answer back and attempt to convince Minori to turn away from such conceited thinking. *This is a good thing, so we must feel happy for Taiga.*

"We've rested enough. Let's go back."

Finishing the can of coffee in one gulp, Ami tossed the can into the bin with precision. "Nice! As expected from Ami-chan!", and made a victory pose.

"Alright, let's go. It'll be fine."

Like a boy, Ami grabbed Ryuuji's arm beneath his gakuran jacket, and roughly wrapped her arm around his shoulder. As they were quite similar in height, Ami's beautiful face was extremely close to Ryuuji's. Even during these moments, those two eyelids and gorgeous eyes still looked dazzling.

"You'll be able to enter the classroom if you're with me, right? Just pretend nothing happened."

Just why? Today, her eyes revealed none of the mischief she would normally have, neither did she confuse people with whether she was seducing or toying with him.

She was just genuinely being close today, as a "friend". Maybe it was because Ryuuji was really very depressed right now...

"You've really changed."

...But I'm very grateful.

"You could tell?"

"You're the only one that's grown up."

"Heh..." Ami turned her eyes away from Ryuuji and looked at the space ahead of her.

"I've always been a grownup, but something has changed a bit... I've been thinking. And after that, I wanted to change... I too have been thinking of changing. .. changing myself..."

A glimmer of hesitation seemed to appear on Ami's face.

"I want to change too. So what should I do? What do you think, Kawashima?"

"Stop pouting and think for yourself."

When Ami turned her face back, she was carrying her usual mischievous smile.

"I'm not the Palmtop Tiger who's always sticking around with you; neither am I Minori-chan, who's your sparkling sun. I, Kawashima Ami, am standing in the same land as you, walking on the same path as you. It's just that I'm a few steps ahead of you... Come on, we need to get back for rehearsals. Tomorrow's the school festival, the real show time."

Ami turned and walked off ahead. Ryuuji looked at his feet for a bit before looking up toward Ami's back.

In the quiet corner where the vending machines stood, there was a 600 yen coin in one of the small change slots, and with it was a note listing the name and class of the culprit, as well as the message - "I broke it. Sorry."

Chapter 5

"Whoa! I never thought there would be this many people queuing..... Damn, I'm getting nervous already, what do I do..."

"Be quiet, Haruta."

"You telling me to be quiet!? Taka-ch....WHOA--!"

Thud! Using a black curtain, the narrow front portion of the classroom just in front of the blackboard was partitioned off as a resting area. Haruta was peeking out into the corridor through a tiny door gap, but suddenly yelled and fell backwards. The classmates around him quickly stretched their hands out, and delivered multiple bullet-like flicks on his forehead.

"Just what on earth are you doing!? Can't you stay quiet? It'll ruin all the fun if people from outside hear what we're doing!"

"Can't you behave more like an executive producer? For goodness' sake!"

"Shut up already, dumbass!"

"Ow ow ow! It's not like I did it on purpose!"

Haruta knelt on the floor and crawled forward, evading the flicks on his forehead and pointed towards the dark figure, whose back was faced towards everyone and was preparing for his rehearsal.

"It's all because Takasu was glaring at me with a scary face!"

"Huh? Me?"

I was only telling you not to be too nervous... Upon hearing his friend's unexpected statement, Ryūji turned around.

"Ugh!?"

"GYAAAA!!!"

Even those who were scolding Haruta a while ago were now trembling their legs or had fled towards the wall. "What's going on?" Ryūji tilted his head and frowned. Taiga, emerging from the changing room after changing into her costume, scowled at the commotion and grabbed Ryūji's shoulder,

"Hey! Why're you guys still fooling.... WHOA---!!!"

Taiga quickly tumbled backwards upon seeing Ryūji's face. *Something is not right here.....* Ryūji picked Taiga up and asked,

"Why're even you reacting like this? Why is everyone yelling upon seeing me?"

"I was too careless... I fell for your Face Flash..."

"My face...? Oh, am I putting on too much makeup...?"

Ryūji finally understood. Though it was now useless to cover it, he still decided to cover his face with his hands.

In order to block out any light from entering the stage, this narrow resting place, which was surround by black curtains, was only illuminated by a small table lamp which nobody was sure who brought it. In this dimly lit space, the light shone from the bottom of Ryūji's evil face upwards, creating a deadly force more powerful than any weapon. His deep blue upper eyelids strongly emphasized his sinister triangular eyes, his thick lower eyelids naturally gave an aura of a dangerous person. His normally dry lips were now applied with so much lip balm that he no longer looked human. If he carries

such a face onto the stage, the audience would almost certainly be mentally traumatized for life.

"What on earth are you thinking? You stupid bomb-faced dog!"

Taiga tossed a few makeup removal tissues to Ryūji. Upon receiving the tissues, Ryūji felt a tinge of sadness-- *I was merely trying to show my enthusiasm. Though I'd feel depressed about showing this evil face to the audience, but I'd still give it my all. This is to repay everyone for not making a big fuss out of my bust-up with Minori. That's why I want to do my best to play this villain part, that's all.*

"Well, I guess I overdid it..."

"That was totally unnecessary!"

Taiga flatly rejected Ryūji's way of thinking,

"You're always like that, thinking 'Am I missing something' all the time. Actually, by having such a thought, you're doing just fine, yet you'll end up overdoing it. Next time remember this."

"I always control myself carefully... By the way, what's with that face of yours? Why is it just you that's so damn

cute? You need a villain's makeup! Here, lemme help you !"

"No thanks, I'm fine as it is."

Taiga sat behind Ryūji. From her reflection in the mirror, he could see her calmly shrugging her shoulders; there was no makeup on her face as usual -- she merely tied a high ponytail behind her hair, roughly giving out a bad girl image. "Heh heh heh." She smiled in a cocky pose and fluttered her black cape, while elegantly opening her black feather fan with her other hand, revealing her trademark pose.

"I still have to trade roles with Bakachi, so I'll spare the villain makeup."

Taiga seemed quite happy. *Is it because your beloved father's going to move in with you that you're in such a good mood?*

Ryūji despondently folded his cape, which was similar to Taiga's, and began removing his excessive makeup. Under his cape he wore a black T-shirt and a pair of black trousers.

Taiga too wore a black T-shirt and black tights. Both simply wore their indoor shoes on their feet. Yet no matter how one looked, they looked nothing like villains in their all black outfits.

"Oh yeah, there's something else more important... you should know..."

"... You're heavy."

Taiga leaned herself on the back of Ryūji, who was kneeling down and removing his makeup. As their eyes met in the mirror, Taiga held her fan in a sadistic way and rubbed Ryūji's terrible looking face, while putting her mouth very near his ear and whispered,

"You must do what I told you this morning."

Under Taiga's cruel stare, Ryūji could only nod. Truth was, on the way to school, Ryūji attempted to resist, but ended up being violently abused by Taiga.

You must apologize to Minorin, and make up with her.

Despite not knowing the whole story, Taiga unilaterally blamed it all on Ryūji, not understanding his

feelings at all. *Or rather, she had no idea she was the main cause of the argument.* As Ryūji made no mention about the reason they argued, Taiga naturally knew nothing about it.

"I said I get it already. Or perhaps you would like to mediate between me and Kushieda? Weren't you chatting happily with her this morning as usual? Couldn't you just casually tell her 'make up with Ryūji already' or something like that?"

"Do you think I'm the sort of person who's perceptive enough to know what people are thinking in order to repair their relationships?"

"So you realize that as well huh... yeah, it's not possible for you to do it. Sorry about that."

Ryūji sighed and redrew the makeup on his eyelids which he over-removed. He was aware himself, even if Taiga didn't tell him, he too had wanted to make up with Minori, he also knew he could not have Taiga as the mediator for this argument, so he had to come up with something. On the other hand, though he wanted to make up with Minori, it didn't mean he accepted what she had said. As long as this matter is not resolved, it

was impossible for them to truly amend their relationship.

Ryūji's face became terrifying, and looked through the mirror behind his back.

"Wow! As expected from Kushieda, it suits you."

"Really? You think so?"

Just what is she wearing? Ryūji could only hear a cheery voice emanating from the changing corner, yet its owner Minori was hidden behind a curtain, he could not even see a single hair.

"Ah... such a pathetic face... Hurry up and make up with her! It's the school festival, if you don't hurry and do so, you won't be able to go out with her."

Ryūji didn't need Taiga's reminding, as he was completely aware of it. He looked at Taiga's small pale face... *It's all because of you...* His resentment suddenly fell like the occasional snow in the city, slowly accumulating before bursting its limit,

"Heh..."

"Wha!?"

Ryūji took the eye pencil he was holding and drew a moustache on that despicable Taiga's face.

"What the hell you doing!?"

"Take this, and this!"

"AHH!!!"

He continued his assault. Neither her forehead nor her chin were spared. Faced with such a sudden attack from the stupid dog, Taiga waved her arms and fled on all fours like a beast.

"OW!"

"Hey Takasu! Don't let the tiger run around in such a small space!"

"Whoa! The black curtain's in danger!"

The classmates making their preparations within the narrow space were feeling bothered. As Taiga prepared to flee under the table full of small props, someone had grabbed her on the neck. She squealed and attempted to

remove that hand, but upon seeing who it was, she quickly froze as though hit by a spell.

"Alright, you should stay still for now. The first show is about to begin soon."

The one who suddenly appeared was Kitamura. He was the Vice President of the Student Council as well as being in charge of discipline and event management, he was also going to play as a student of "Team Ami" in the play. Like the other extras, he wore a white T-shirt and a pair of PE trousers. His glasses shone as always.

"According to the guys at the sales counter, the audience for the first show will include all those queuing outside right now, that's more than enough to fill 80% of the seats. There'll also be some people who won't be coming until just before the show starts, so I'm guessing it's gonna be a full house."

Whoa... The people inside dimly lit resting zone murmured.

"Wow, is it really gonna be a full house? And I thought no one's interested in wrestling."

"And aren't there even more visitors than last year? The corridor has been packed with people since this morning."

"Speaking of last year, even our own schoolmates didn't bother coming, the school was quite empty."

"There are plenty of visitors from other schools this year as well."

Kitamura nodded keenly,

"That's right. This year the Student Council has specially gone to visit other schools to promote this event , regardless of the weather, as well as posting plenty of flyers to inform everyone of this 'Inter Class Competition' . It was surprisingly popular. Besides, as each class is attempting to get as many votes as possible, they would get their friends from their junior high to come visit as well, we now even have more junior high students visiting than ever."

"Whoo...! Junior high schoolgirls..."

"Damn! Can I go flirt with them?"

The whole class squatted in the narrow space, withstanding the incredible heat while whispering with each other.

"Maruo, time to get the guests to their seats."

Though they heard the girl from the counter speaking, no one made any sound. Even Taiga, who was agonizingly silent while being grabbed by Kitamura, realized the importance of this and diligently got to her feet. Behind two layers of black curtains was the sound of chairs shuffling and people chatting as they got to their seats, it seemed like there were quite a lot of people.

"Is everyone ready?"

Suppressing her voice, Ami emerged from the black curtain. Upon seeing her costume, everyone in the resting area applauded with their index fingers to avoid making any sound.

As expected from the protagonist, she was indeed the main attraction. Ami wore the same T-shirt like everyone else, though she wore a pleated skirt borrowed from the tennis club, beneath it her long beautiful legs shone brightly. Though she wore a pair of tights under the skirt , but...

"Ami really is understanding..."

"She's too beautiful..."

The guys were nearly kneeling on all fours and worshipping her dazzling appearance. Even the girls' scornful looks and hisses did not affect them. As the last batch of audience took their seats, the classroom was filled with the audience's mutterings.

"Alright... let us do our best for Ami's beautiful legs... Let's go everyone!"

Haruta the idiot lowered his voice to the limit. Everyone nodded and stretched out their right hand, trying as much as possible to overlap them with each other. Ryūji, who carried a terrible villainous face; Taiga, who placed her fan under her armpits and rested on Ryūji's head; Kitamura, who nodded; Ami, who smiled at everyone with her angelic face; Noto, who placed his hand on Haruta's shoulder; Maya, who rolled up her sleeve to reveal her slim shoulders; Nanako, the diligent girl who smiled at the guys who were standing too near; the male classmate who wore a princess headpiece as a prank; the female classmate who held onto her rapidly beating heart; the classmate who still clung onto his

script; as well as the classmate who was desparate to go to the bathroom. Everyone, including Minori who was standing where Ryūji could not see, was feeling the same way.

"Well then, I hope that our first Class 2-C pro-wrestling show will go off to a great success! OK everyone! FIGHT---!!!"

"IPPATSU!" (Based on a well-known commercial slogan in Japan by energy drink Lipovitan - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lipovitan)

YEAH!!! As everyone applauded with their fingertips, someone couldn't resist and commented "Why are we using a slogan straight out of an energy drink commercial...?"

* * *

"Visitors, please don't stay in the same spot! On your left is the old school building, on your right is the new one! Why isn't anyone listening to me--!?"

A group of visitors, hesitating whether to go left or right, were now congregated at a V-shaped junction on the corridor. A bunch of sailor uniformed schoolgirls from another school asked, "Where is it?" While some people approached them, ready to flirt. Parents were walking around with their cameras in hand. "Honey, just where is Class 1-D anyway?" "Is it this way, Dad?" Groups of junior high students ran around excitedly. Some visitors found themselves the centre of a struggle for visitors between different clases, with a junior class girl in an apron holding one arm and exclaiming, "We have some tasty crepes in our class!" And another student stopping them and proclaiming, "The crepes in our class are all freshly baked!"

Faced with such chaos, the girl wearing a Student Council armband and responsible for controlling the crowds was now close to tears.

"Can everyone please stop pushing! It's dangerous... KYA!! Umph...!"

The girl made a strange yell and was buried within the chaos. A boy wearing a similar armband quickly rushed over and pulled her out, though this time it was his turn to be drowned by the sea of people, alongside his bad luck.

At the corner of this chaotic corridor...

"Hey, I got an SMS message? What photo is this?"

"Lesse... 'The pro-wrestling show in Class 2-C is awesome'...?"

"Isn't that Kawashima Ami!? She's cute, ain't she... WHOA!? What's with that mini-skirt? Lemme see that photo! Just who sent this anyway?"

"Forward it to me as well! I need to save this! Who took it anyway?"

"The guys who saw the wrestling show. They even said here, 'Takasu the delinquent and the Palmtop Tiger are just hilarious!' ..... Seriously? Now that's creepy!"

"Huh? Is it really that good? What's it about anyway? Where is it?"

"Let's go have a look! Since our shift won't begin anytime soon, and it's not yet lunch break."

“Hey, what's that? Lemme have a look! Whoa, what on earth is this" ..... And so the images coming from an unknown source quickly spread around like a virus.

"T, that's... that's the precious treasure of Class 2-C, passed down through the generations!"

"That's right! The most important treasure... 'the Homeroom Teacher's Red-String of Fate'! Heh heh heh heh!"

"Stop! You can't do that! Not that of all things!"

Ami's screams echoed throughout the classroom. Standing with their legs hideously spread open, the crab-like legion pointed excitedly at Ami and giggled, " Heh... heh... heh..."

When a victim is brain-washed, he'll end up walking like a crab --- That was the setting Haruta had insisted on. A group of people moved their legs slowly in a crab-like manner and surrounded Ami. In other words, all the students in Class 2-C, with the exception of Ami, had been brainwashed. Oh, the terror! Oh, the humanity!

In such a serious situation, the giggles of the audience, together with comments of "How boring!" from some busybody, merely intensified the atmosphere.

"Noto-kun! You too are a Class 2-C classmate! How could someone as kind and gentle as you do something so cruel?"

The spotlight landed on the daughter of the Great Homicide Investigator Yuuzuki Reiko. As expected of

Ami, even if her acting wasn't up to standard, from the passion emitted from her voice, she still managed to add to the intensity to this foolish situation.

"We're supposed to be friends! Classmates happily enjoying life together in Class 2-C!"

Ami tremored as she stretched out her hands, trying very hard to convince Noto. Every word spoken was followed by her mini-skirt wavering, showing her long thighs, and capturing the hearts of the male audience sitting in the front row.

"Friends? I don't remember such a thing already... Though my heart was indeed kind and gentle before..."

Noto, who never thought he would play such an important role, took out a pair of scissors. He purposely licked his lips and slowly opened the scissors, placing the 'Red String of Fate' into it. Noto was so into his role that his glasses slid down his nose... even his convincing acting looked extremely foolish.

"But now! My heart is completely dedicated to our master, the Palmtop Tiger! Master, please give us your instructions!"

The spotlights now moved towards a podium formed by a ladder.

"Bibibi, bibibi!"

"Bibibibibibibi!"

Taiga and Ryūji behind her stood on top of that podium.

Both wore a black cape and stood in a crab-like manner with their arms raised, chanting, "Bibibi" non-stop. *When brainwashing, you must also do it in a crab-like manner* So insisted Haruta the director.

Matching Noto's gaze, Taiga opened her black feather fan, which she seemed to be fond of, and waved it. She stretched out her right hand from beneath the cape and pointed forward, and commanded the brain-washed brigade with a deep and low voice,

"Cat it apat!"

'Boom! *The sound effect came on cue, but Taiga had misread her line.*

The brain-washed brigade all fell to the floor, their reaction had nothing to do with acting. The audience, who were laughing all along, too fell from their chairs.

"Idiot... bibibi... say it again... bibibi..."

Ryūji, standing behind Taiga and emitting his brainwashing waves, placed his chin on her head and urged her to do it again. Taiga cleared her throat and said,

"Cut it apart!"

'Boom!' The sound effect came again. Noto took his cue and stepped into the spotlight,

"Heh heh heh heh heh! I'm now going to cut it in half, so that you'll never recover it!"

Snip The treasure 'the Homeroom Teacher's Red-String of Fate' was now cut in half. Just as Ami exclaimed, " How can this happen!?" The next second, a yell fifty times louder than Ami's exclamation was heard,

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Sitting at the last row, the homeroom teacher, Koigakubo Yuri (aged 30) suddenly stood up and screamed. *Wow! Such realistic acting, Koigakubo!* Cried out the audience as they turned their heads around. "Ahhhh! Ahhhh!" The Single Lady cried out in an agony that looked so real, while pulling over the Red String that was cut apart, revealing one end to be actually tied to her little finger. The Single Lady continued her agonizing acting and ran away from the audience. "Wow, Yuri-chan's acting sure is superb! It's almost realistic!" Even when the students from other classes which had attended her English lessons were muttering, she did not stop and turn around.

"As expected of Yuri-chan, great acting!" Haruta, in charge of lighting and dialog, stood under the shadow of the curtains and nodded approvingly of the Single Lady's acting. At first, Yuri refused to participate, crying, " Absolutely not! Even if it's fake! Who knows if it might actually happen?" It was only after the whole class begged her that she gave in. This was partly because she felt herself to be partially responsible for selfishly deciding the class's school festival activity, though another reason was because she heard someone mutter, " It's because she's so stubborn that she's still single..."

As the Single Lady left the classroom, Ami wrapped her head in pain and said,

"This is too terrible! Just what more do you want before you can stop!?"

"Heh heh heh heh heh!"

The wrestling podium consisted of a mat on the floor, with ladders acting as the corners of the podium, and three pieces of rope were tied around these ladders. Besides Ami, the other people standing on the podium were all crabs. Ami was now forced into a corner, and knelt helplessly on the floor.

"What should I do in order to save everyone!?"

"Bibibibibibibi!"

With a determined look, Ami glared at the Palmtop Tiger and her Delinquent Henchman, who were busy emitting their brainwashing waves from above.

"I cannot allow you to do something so horrible! You violent, ugly and miniature Palmtop Tiger, as well as you , the henchman who looks like a delinquent, but actually behaves more like a manly housewife!"

Huh? Is it me or is that line longer than usual? Haruta wondered. "Violent, ugly and miniature...?" "Manly housewife...?" While still emitting their brainwashing waves, veins could be seen popping out on Taiga and Ryūji's foreheads. Though Ami's passionate acting continued...

"Oh! ... But everyone has now turned into hostages! What should I do? I cannot stand by and watch everyone fall like that! Why is fate so cruel to me? Who can save me?"

Sad music started to play, and the lights began to dim, with only one spotlight shining on Ami, who was crying helplessly. This was supposed to be a serious scene, yet for some reason the audience was whistling fervently. Was it something to do with Ami's thighs being revealed as she sat on the floor? Flashes of cameras clicking away could be heard. The crab-like legion took this chance to back down quietly and prepared for the next scene. *CLAP CLAP!* As flares were forbidden in school, the crew working under the stage used chalk powder instead, clapping the blackboard cleaners together loudly to create a misty effect.

"God has seen everything."

"Heave ho!"

Under the mist, four guys lifted Minori onto the stage. "C, Captain Kushieda!?" "Why is the captain who led her softball team into the last eight of the Kanto Tournament in such an outfit?" Most of the exclamation came from the junior members in the softball team. This was probably the first time they had seen the Kushidea-senpai that they admire in an outfit besides her softball uniform. The other audience members applauded for Minori's serious expression.

A bald-cap, eyepatch, buck teeth, a jumper and belt normally worn by old ladies, this character was what Haruta called a "podium fairy". From the script, it seemed that she is God.

"Warrior Ami, I shall give you a chance. If you can use your own pure power to capture everyone's hearts, then I shall agree to release them from their brainwashed trance ... Now come, how will they answer this question I give them? Act carefully."

So said the god with her bald cap, who then suddenly yelled a strange voice,

"ATTACK CHANCE---!"

Her voice sounded eerie, echoing across the podium. The audience was speechless and their minds blank. At this moment...

"Who is the most beautiful person in this world?"

A sudden question.

"KAWASHIMA AMI!!!"

Just as the bald-headed god asked her question, many voices quickly answered miraculously in synch with each other. This meant Ami had successfully captured their hearts.

"Very good!"

Ami's face beamed in a way it was hard to just use " good acting" to describe. Anyway, she smiled ecstatically in a way she would normally not show, slightly distorting her pretty face. "Whoa, how can she have such an evil expression..." As someone with a sharp gaze commented, the lights went out, followed by bright lighting from three different directions.

As everyone struggled to see in this blinding light...

"W, what was I doing?"

"Ami-chan, what happened to us?"

"I felt like I just had a bad dream."

"Amazing!"

"At last!"

"We're back to normal!"

Amongst the classmates who stopped standing like crabs, a group stood in a line and sang like a choir, " Doo-waa!" Announcing that their brainwash was dispelled. The audience applauded in excitement. As it's come to this, there's no way the Palmtop Tiger and her Delinquent Henchman could let them get away with this, according to the script.

"We'll have to take drown... dramat... drastic measures! "

"Kawashima Ami! Unforgivable!"

Just as Taiga struggled to get her lines across, Ryūji quickly concluded for her. By now they no longer need to chant and stand like crabs. They then stood and made their trademark stance on the ladder.

"Let's go!"

"Right!"

After making gestures to each other, they removed their capes and stared at the people on the podium. Ryūji grabbed hold of Taiga's body...

"Ready..."

"Whoooo!" Applause rumbled around the audience. Four of the backstage helpers beat the drum on cue to signify that the fight has began. Taiga at once leapt from the ladder, with Ryūji's arms providing a boost to her leap forward.

"Wow! Amazing...!"

"The Palmtop Tiger is here!"

"Ami-chan, run!"

From the ladder, Taiga made two tumbleturns before landing on the podium, with a group of boys holding her steady as she touched down, allowing her to turn swiftly like a cat and go into battle stance at once. In place of the ropes, which lack any elasticity, the backstage crew placed their hands behind Taiga's back, and using this thrust, Taiga charged forward,

"CHAAARGEEE!!!"

Taiga made use of her amazing spurt, and leapt like a rubber band, jumping a few metres above the ground. She then spun like a top and made a deadly spinning kick.

"Take this!"

"......! That was close!"

Ami exclaimed, and dodged elegantly. Though the attack was all according to script, Taiga's shoes still managed to scrape through Ami's bangs. Amidst the cheers, Taiga changed her centre of gravity and yelled,

"Who you calling violent, ugly and miniature---!?"

She made a double kick aimed towards Ami's head, as though she really intended to break Ami's jaw - Though of course this too was according to script. With two crew members assisting her, Ami flipped backwards in a gracious manner to avoid the attack. "Eek!" Yet Ami's scream sounded very real.

"Hey, did you see that attack just now?"

"No, it was too fast. I can't follow with my eyes!"

The fight was so exciting that even the classmates in charge of commentating the fight were amazed.

Ryūji too jumped off the ladder, just in time to form a Double Lariat combo attack with Taiga. Ami managed to squat quickly to dodge the attack, which was nervously parried by the delicate hands of Maya and Nanako, who came out of their brainwash trance, with their own Double Lariat combo.

"Umph!"

"Ahh!"

Pretending to be hit, both Ryūji and Taiga landed backwards on the podium mat. The classmates from the gymnastic team made their own flipping movements behind, to add to the atmosphere. Ami took this opportunity to get up and sat on Taiga, who was trying to get up. Though Taiga was stuck, Ryūji was slowly creeping behind Ami, and despicably carried a foldable chair in his hands.

"Ami-chan! Behind you!"

Some of the audience stood with their chairs falling over, trying to warn Ami of the danger behind.

"Ha!"

"Takasu, heave!"

"Delinquent, take this!"

Five guys carried Ryūji like a sedan chair and threw him onto the mat, which was followed by everyone else mercilessly falling on top of him. "That's for going to Ami-chan's mansion alone!" "Don't think you can get away with that!" "Why didn't you take any swimsuit pictures if you were going to the beach!?" "You seem to

be getting all the best bits!" - All those whispers that went into Ryūji's ears were all genuine. This can be shown by the way they were all crushing Ryūji to the point of him losing his breath, despite agreeing beforehand not to hold him down with their bodies... "W, why you people... "

Finally, it came to the last scene. Ami and Taiga switched stances and rolled around, while exchanging glances with each other.

"OK, here goes, midget. Ready..."

"Ow ow ow ow ow!"

"Ow ow ow ow ow! Stop kicking my legs!"

Lying on the ground, Ami lifted Taiga's light body up with all her limbs, and performed a perfect Romera Special manuever. "Whooooo!" The audience applauded so thunderously that even the windows behind the curtains shook. Paper pieces fell over the stage as the crew beat the drums and rang on the bell to signify that the fight was over. Haruta the umpire-director came on and declared,

"THE WINNER IS: KAWASHIMA--- AMI---! As well as the Class 2-C Brigade---!"

The audience gave a standing ovation, and they clapped and cheered all the way, drowning out Haruta's own cheers,

"AMI! AMI! AMI! AMI! ..." Amidst this cheering,

"Oh no..."

"What's wrong?"

"I think I got a cramp on my back..."

"Just hang on until the curtain falls. Once we switch roles, I'll be the one taking all that pain..."

"Ughhhh..."

Tears slowly dripped out of Taiga's eyes, though no one seemed to notice.

* * *

"Welcome back, Master!"

"Greetings Princess! Your one and only Prince Charming has come to receive you!"

"I-it's not like we really care whether you come to our class' coffee house or not!"

"We have thousands of manga where you can read all you want! Just one drink and you can read up to an hour for free!"

The corridor was bustling with students, parents, junior high schoolers preparing for their exams, as well as students from other schools, which got even more crowded as noon came. Some people were immersed in the festive atmosphere, trying to impress people with their flirting. "Hey! Long time no see!" Some people behind them even started their own mini class reunions. In the end of the corridor were two neighbouring stalls with two equally long queues: "Visitors for the maid cafe

please stick to the wall!" "Hold it right there! What do you think you're doing snatching our customers as though it's nothing!?" "The hell!? These are OUR customers from here all the way till over there!" "You're from Class 1-A, right? Just you wait, you junior classmen! " "Shouldn't you seniors be spending time preparing for your exams!?" The trigger was fired, and the battle of the maids has begun.

"Hey, those cuties are quarelling! Yeah, c'mon! Get her, man!"

"Show her what you got, long-skirted maid! I'm rooting for you, senior!"

"Are you out of your mind!? That first year maid's wearing thigh-high socks! 'Absolute Territory' rules, man !" (http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ZettaiRyouiki)

A crowd began to gather to watch the commotion, the people queuing too were being roused.

"HEY YOU! Are you trying to get the School Festival cancelled---!?"

Whack! Someone had come from behind and grabbed their heads, banging them together. The two quarelling girls quickly fell on their knees. "I'm sorry, I guess we're a bit too hot headed!" "No, no, no! It's our fault for offending you seniors!" Two boys came forward and dragged their respective maids back.

"Good work, Aniki!"

"As expected from the boss of the Kanou sisters!"

The students broke into thunderous applause. The person who elegantly punished the two bickering girls and raised her hand to respond to her admirers was a very beautiful and elegant-looking girl with snowy, white skin and long dark hair which was hung all the way behind her back.

"Alright! In any case, all of you pipe down! Everyone queue up properly into two rows! And don't cross that line! HEY! I said queue properly!"

"Yessir!"

With her extraordinary charm, it wasn't just the students, even the parents began to queue up in an

orderly manner at the sound of her command. - This person was none other than the school's spiritual leader, the perfect Student Council president, Kanou Sumire.

"As expected from the president, you've performed beautifully!"

"By the way... is it OK for Kitamura to loiter around here?"

"I hate that woman..."

Saying those were Kitamura the Student Council vice-president, as well as Ryūji and Taiga. The wrestling show of Class 2-C was a resounding success, and it was now lunch break, and so the three of them were now looking around the chaotic festival stalls together to grab something to eat... Though "together" isn't exactly the right word. Ryūji was still hesitating whether he should apologize to Minori, who had already been grabbed by her junior club members and dragged to who-knows-where. On the other hand, Ami had also left with Maya and Nanako.

For the remaining trio, their leader Kitamura clapped his hands while seeing off the president leaving in style and vanishing from the corner.

"It's fine, those of us in charge of discipline are all strictly sticking to our shifts. What's more worrying is... Aisaka, you alright?"

"Eh..... w, why do you ask!?"

"You're eating your ribbon along with your crepe."

Pfft! Taiga spat out her ribbon tie from her mouthful of crepe. *How do you even manage to do that? You're such a glutton...* Thought Ryūji.

"Ha ha ha ha! Seeing how seriously you're eating that crepe, it must be really delicious! If I'd known I would've bought one myself. Mind if I take a bite? Just the edge would do."

"......!"

"Ah..." Looking with hysterical eyes at Kitamura, who had opened his mouth, Taiga's face had gone beyond crimson red, it was now pale and devoid of colour. Ryūji was thinking, *Would she die just from that?* But Taiga still managed to hand the crepe over to Kitamura while trembling, saying in a weak falsetto,

"G, go ahead and have as much as you like..."

"Thanks! You're so generous!"

What a moving scene. With a carefree smile, Kitamura ate up a chunk of Taiga's crepe, even leaving his teethmarks on it. Taiga widened her jaw, but didn't make any sound.

"Hmm... not bad. There's plenty of banana chocolate and ice cream in it as well."

"....."

Kitamura's teethmarks remained on the crepe that was handed back to Taiga, who stared intensely at those teethmarks like sunlight on a magnifying glass. Ryūji could more or less guess that she's thinking very hard with that small brain of hers - '*Should I keep this as a souvenir? Or should I eat it while it's still fresh and have an indirect kiss? But an indirect kiss wouldn't look too nice, and it'll be too embarrassing. Yet I can't just leave it around. What should I do? ...' She's probably thinking along those lines, what an idiot.* He first looked at Taiga's hair whorl, and then at Kitamura, who was in a great mood. *Even as a friend, one wouldn't be so stupid as to so nonchalantly bite*

into something that's being eaten by the opposite sex, would he ? Just what's with him!?

"R, Ryūji you should have some!"

"UMPH!"

Now this reaction was unexpected. *Has Taiga thought of a solution? Or is she just so confused that she's resorted to this ?* In any case, she had taken the crepe which was munched by Kitamura and stuffed it into Ryūji's mouth.

"UGH! UMPH! BLEAH.....!"

"It's delicious, right? Right!?"

Taiga kept on stuffing what remained of the crepe into Ryūji's mouth. "You guys sure get along well." Kitamura smiled and looked at them. Ryūji was having such great difficulty in breathing that he was close to suffocating. He kept on munching and pushed off Taiga's penetrating fingers from his throat, and finally swallowed the whole thing in the nick of time.

"A... are you trying to kill me!? Do you really hate me that much!?"

"AHHH...!"

Ryūji wasn't the only one with teary eyes. "Ugh....." As a result of not thinking with her brain, Taiga had lost the treasure in her hand, and could only look at her empty palms and lower her head despondently. Though Ryūji, who was nearly choked, showed not even the slightest sympathy for her. *It's the school festival and yet I can't even spend it with Minori. This is all Taiga's fault. So it doesn't matter if she's a bit lacking in luck, besides, she'll soon be having a happy life with her dad...*

"By the way, hasn't your dad come? You got any message yet?"

As her father hadn't arrived, Taiga quickly sent a message to him once recess started, which read, "Still haven't arrived? What time you coming? Only 3 shows left in the afternoon." And though this isn't really relevant, but Ryūji couldn't help but notice the title of her message: "Hey, scumbag".

"Not yet. If he's gonna be like that then say he's not coming... really, just what's with him?"

"You wanna call him?"

"I did... no answer. Sigh, that's not important. We need to get something to eat, I'm starving."

"What about that huge crepe you had?"

"In here."

Taiga at once pointed at Ryūji's stomach. "There's some here as well." Added Kitamura as he pointed to his.

"OK... how about we look for a decent place? What should we have... hmm, yakisoba, udon, okonomiyaki... Is there anyplace that serves desserts or shaved ice? What's this? 'Authentic Chinese!'... Chinese!?"

"Huh? Trying to call dishes made from an extremely weak stove Chinese? Are they thinking too much?"

"We've only got coffee shops left besides those."

The trio stood by the side of the wall to avoid the moving crowds while hesitating as they looked at the stall itinerary. As there's now a competition element added for this year's class activities, most classes have opted to serve food and drinks. As a result, the simpler

activities like introduction to local sights and sounds, historical researches, or calligraphy exhibitions were hard to find and were nearly invisible.

"I'm definitely not going to that one."

"Yeah, that's gross."

"Why do they want to do that anyway?"

"Everybody Let's Learn! - Basic Body Toning Exercise Classes" - A strange activity was being held in PE teacher Kuro-Muscle's class. It seems Muscle (his real name's supposed to be Kuroma something) has forced everyone in his class to drink a glass of protein during lunch.

"How weird."

"So is their homeroom teacher."

"Aren't the students who obediently listened to him even more weird?"

"How sad." - The three of them nodded in agreement. Though what they didn't realize was that the

schoolmates from other classes were saying the exact same things about them when they heard Class 2-C was to have a pro-wrestling show.

"Master, welcome back~"

Not sure whether she was from the 3-dimensional realm, or just borderline cosplaying - with her long hair tied into twin ponytails, a girl dressed up in a maid costume came out to greet her customers. *Could it be because it's the school festival that she's allowed to wear like that?* One step faster than the trio who was about to leave , she quickly opened the menu she was holding,

"We're serving lunch right now. One plate of omelette rice is 800yen. Additional drinks would be 200yen. With another 300yen we can even add a cute drawing on top using ketchup!"

"Whoa, expensive!"

Daunted by the prices, Ryūji took a step backwards.

"KYAA! Delinquent Takasu!"

Upon seeing Ryūji's face, this time it was the maid's turn to drop her menu from startlement. "Pfft!" Taiga quickly laughed,

"Hahahahaha! As expected from Ryūji! Even maids trying to solicit customers wouldn't dare approach you! How pathetic!"

"KYAA! The Palmtop Tiger!"

Noticing Taiga hiding behind Ryūji, the maid quickly pretended not to see anything and fled at once. Taiga didn't even have the energy to chase her and simply stood there with her mouth shut.

"Pfft! She ran away. Looks like I'm not the only one that's pathetic, huh?"

"What'd you say..."

Despite knowing it would kill him, Ryūji just couldn't resist fighting back. "Hmph!" "OW...!" Taiga stomped hardly on Ryūji's foot, attempting to crush it. If it weren't for the fact that Kitamura was nearby, Ryūji's foot would be even worse off.

"Alright, enough already. Thanks to you guys, no one is daring to come to us."

And so Kitamura had to mediate between the two. Both Ryūji and Taiga felt something complicated, they had noticed it when the maid fled from the sight of them. Though their poor reputation in school was a combination of truth and rumours, they realized there probably won't be any stall that would gladly welcome them. At this moment...

"Um... can the three of you please wait a moment?"

"May we ask you to come to our class?"

A few boys, whom they've never seen before, timidly asked them. Even when Ryūji and Taiga both turned around, they did not flee in terror. Kitamura smiled and asked,

"Well, what're you guys selling? We're looking for somewhere we could eat."

"Our class isn't selling food, but if you're willing to come, we can pay for your meals as well. Um... pardon me, but are you Kitamura, the captain of the baseball team?"

"Yes, I am."

"And those two behind, it's the Delinq... Takasu-san and the Palmtop... Aisaka-san, right?"

"Yeah."

"What do you want?"

The boys gave a smile as though asking for a favour,

"Our class is holding a 'World Martial Arts Tournament', but as our participants so far have been too weak... We're wondering if you guys are willing to join. We were most impressed by your superb performance in the wrestling show, that was too amazing."

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dragon_Ball)

Absolutely not - Kitamura, Ryūji and Taiga all gave a helpless look. Here was another class that was holding a strange event.

After firmly refusing their invitation, the three of them continued to wander in the chaotic food avenue within the new school building. After walking a while, they got

a bit tired, and went into the less crowded old school building. There was no noise or chaos here, and the corridors were much easier to navigate. Though walking was easier...

"Coming here, it feels as though there's hardly any decent stalls here."

"The Arts Club seems to have some exhibition... let's see what we have, the theme is 'Monotonic Night Scenes'. .. How boring. Is it because there are all these nonsensical exhibitions that there's no one here?"

"Don't say it like that, since the itinerary does say there're stalls nearby..."

As Kitamura, who walked in front of them, turned around and said to the two people who were feeling disinterested...

"Welcome."

A deep voice from the end of the corridor called out to them. Over there was a very quiet store - sorry, classroom. The signboard outside read "Canteen - University Science Pathway Volunteers". From the name, one could guess this stall was being run by third years

studying for university. It was quite different from those stalls that relied on flashy costumes or friendly waitresses to attract their customers.

"Three people is it? We have plenty of seats."

As expected from a third year senior. Wearing a cool-looking apron and opening the door curtain with one hand, the senior did not even look scared when he saw Taiga and Ryūji.

"I went to have a look at your class's pro-wrestling show, it was tiring, right? You guys must be exhausted, so welcome to our yakisoba store."

"W, well... Takasu, Aisaka, what do you guys think?"

Seeing both had nodded, Kitamura led the way and entered the stall.

"Hey! Lead three guests to their seats!"

"Roger that!"

"Welcome!"

Voices in the stall shouted consecutively. Ryūji felt like this was the first time he felt so welcomed by a store.

The decoration in the classroom resembled an izakaya. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Izakaya) The three of them sat on their seats and read their menus. Ryūji began to order, "Um, I'll have...cooled noodles." While for Taiga ... "What's this? I'll have grilled octopus then." *They actually serve these?* Looking a bit surprised, Kitamura said, "Er... I guess I'll go with the yakisoba you recommended then. Extra serving." (TL note: Editors please doublecheck what Ryūji actually ordered. I'm just guessing the English equivalent here. +Did a check for you since I have the originals. The translation for this part should be good now.)

"Got it!"

"Roger!"

The three orders were all clearly conveyed to the kitchen. (Or were they?) Upon sitting properly and looking around, there were other customers in the classroom, some were reading the menus, others were

having fried rice, all enjoying the serene and simplistic atmosphere of this stall. They could occasionally hear people commenting on the food,

"This is quite delicious".

Ryūji subconsciously felt the table with his finger, it was smooth and shiny, and not a single speck of dirt was spotted. He looked at the legs of the tables and chairs - blind spots which even well-known restaurants would neglect when cleaning - there was no dust there too. Everytime an order was made, the staff would shout enthusiastically, "Roger that!"

Though it was nothing new, it did bring a sense of liveliness to the stall.

Though I wonder what results there'll be if I inspect the upper area of the door curtain with my Takasu Stick. Ryūji gave a quite evil smile, but then he sensed something wrong,

"Is this stall somehow related to Kanou Groceries?"

"Hmm? Well, Kanou Groceries is the president's family business, we even advertised for them in the itineraries. To put it simply, they're the largest sponsor of the school festival."

Ryūji was pointing towards a corner of the classroom, which stuck a poster advertising this week's special offers from Kanou Groceries. There was even a photo of the store manager standing in front of the store smiling while holding a white carrot, adorned with elegant words that read "Food Supplier". "Aha!" Kitamura clapped his hands and nodded,

"I see, Science Pathway Volunteers... this is the president's class..."

The stall was decorated with violet bonsais everywhere. Violet - the flower of Sumire (TL note: Sumire is literally "violet") - this was probably a way of showing respect to the true leader of this stall event. As expected from the perfect Student Council president, there was no question that her class would also participate in the school festival, and that she too would be organizing it from behind the scenes. Ryūji crossed his arms and said in a cool-looking manner,

"Hmm... this president sure is amazing... Seems like she'll be successful in the catering industry."

"She's successful in anything she does, because she's no ordinary person... In that case, I'm beginning to look forward to what I'll be eating. It should be something good, right?"

For some reason, Kitamura's tone sounded a bit cold. *Wouldn't he usually give priority to the Student Council, or indeed the president's orders, over anything else, and would always go on and on about how amazing the president is?*

Meanwhile, Taiga kept looking down, punching her fingers onto something, *What an uncooperative fellow!* Ryūji looked at her hand,

"Hey, what're you doing? You've been quite for a while now..."

"Wha!? Oh, I, I was playing video games..."

Taiga hastily closed her cell phone. *Liar* - Ryūji could clearly see that Taiga was checking her messages. *Taiga's really concerned about her dad, which she had no news on, and was waiting for him to reply. She's probably thinking, "D, dad's still not come yet? Has he really not come yet?" And to*

think she's got this excellent chance to enjoy the school festival with her crush Kitamura, and yet she's wasting this great opportunity. Ryūji really felt like telling her, *"Look at me! I'm completely being ignored by my crush Minori!"*

"Sigh," Ryūji sighed helplessly. *Is it over now? Spring has passed by, so has summer, has all that hard work to get ourselves just a bit closer all gone down the drain? This isn't something which I can just recover by grabbing and apologizing to her, and I don't think I can ever accept her thinking.* The one-sided love that's lasted for almost a year was now like a candle in the wind. The only support that had kept Ryūji moving on now felt extremely vunerable.

"You sure are relaxed. For someone with as simple a brain as yours, your concerns for your loved ones sure is superficial."

"Huh!? What're you talking about? Is *your* brain alright ? I'm really worried about your intelligence, you know?"

As they continued exchanging chilling insults, a plate of roast takoyaki - actually it's just takoyaki - has arrived. Taiga's attention immediately shifted from Ryūji towards the takoyaki, and she picked up a toothpick, ready to

take one up. Ryūji stopped her, "Wait for everyone else's dishes to arrive first." Taiga had wanted to complain, but blushed embarrassingly upon realizing Kitamura was here as well. Afterwards came Ryūji's "udon", actually just simple ramen. When Kitamura's yakisoba had arrived as well, the three of them picked up their chopsticks, and in tandem with the waiters greeting new customers, said,

"I'm digging in!"

"Ah...!"

"Whoa!"

Maybe it was because Ryūji was thinking of other stuff , that his "nanny sensor" was reacting slower than usual. As she was about to bring the takoyaki into her mouth, Taiga accidentally dropped it onto her skirt. By the time Ryūji managed to grab the takoyaki, the sauce had already left a smear on the skirt.

"Really, how'd you manage anyway, idiot!? Lean forward, and eat with your chin over the plate!"

"Ugh..."

Taiga stuck her lips outward looking annoyed, and messily picked up the takoyaki on her skirt and stuck it into her mouth, only to wave her arms frantically from being burnt by the hot takoyaki. Ryūji, like a nagging mother, ended up wiping the sauce off Taiga's skirt with a facial tissue before Kitamura, who smiled awkardly.

However, Ryūji had neglected something.

Though he was troubled by his row with Minori, his alertness was way off the mark this time.

The sauce had also landed on Taiga's front sleeve, but no one had noticed it, not even Ryūji. And it wasn't until some time later that stain was discovered.

By the time Ryūji found out, it was already too late, and it left an indelible mark in his heart at the same time.

* * *

It was 4pm, and the pro-wrestling show of Class 2-C had ended in unprecedented success - with all shows being sold out.

The actors on stage and the excited audience all applauded. "Full house!" "Amazing! Great success!" - And complimented each other for their passionate performance, to the point that their voices had gone hoarse. The backstage staff blew the last horn and used up the last pieces of ticker-tape, which flew everywhere in the air.

Amidst this endless applause, Taiga, wearing a villain cape, stood speechless in the corner of the podium. "Hey! Supporting Character No. 1!" But she still got dragged to the centre by a carried-away Haruta, who had her stand beside Ryūji. No matter how thunderous the applause was, she still silently looked at her feet, carrying unhappiness and doubt in her eyes.

In the end, Taiga never did become the protagonist.

Chapter 6

"Like I said, don't--- move! I can't apply any lipstick on you this way!"

"I don't need those!"

"Of course you do! Your lips are too thin! How can you be so confident with your looks without any makeup!? Do you really think you're so cute!?"

"You're annoying, Bakachi! Just how long are you going to be this annoying?"

The room filled with the scent of chemicals was like a battlefield, with girls screaming everywhere. "Oh! This colour looks cute!" "How can that woman not apologize after bumping into people!?" "Hey! Where's the face powder? It's gone!" "Oh no! The pen's broken!" These voices were beginning to sound like roaring.

In one corner amidst the commotion, Ami took out a posh branded bag containing make up tools, and with a serious look in her eyes, held Taiga's chin with both hands. Sitting in front of the mirror, Taiga was completely uncooperative, and merely glanced towards her cellphone in her hand and frowning her eyebrows,

refused to sit properly. The light pink lipstick followed Taiga's protruded lips, attempting to add another layer of bright colour on her lips.

"Stop moving... don't open your mouth, close it, close it, good... Alright, it's done. Next is lip gloss. Now which should we use... The limited Chanel coral one? Though it looks a bit too bright, or maybe the RMK pastel violet one? ... It'll suit your pale skin better. Or perhaps the M.A.C. transparent one to let your lips sparkle and keep its original colour. Hmm--- But that's too modest, not really my taste. We can also use the NARS multi-function lip gloss, but your lips would look too dry..."

Ami took out many lip glosses from her bag, and like a magician shuffling his cards, she elegantly opened their lids one by one and dripped them onto her fingertips as she began thinking. "Hmm... Should we use Chanel? Or NARS? M.A.C. Dior? Or maybe we should just use the cheaper local ones?" Ami was now making all sorts of incomprehensible spells as she carefully compared the variously coloured liquids with Taiga's lips, totally immersed in her thoughts. The pretentious girl was now even crossing her legs like a crab.

"Hmm... mmm..."

"Bibibi..."

"What is it, Takasu-kun? Did you just say something?"

"Not really, for some reason... I just felt like doing this, to see if I could really brainwash you..."

"Huh? Well, I don't have time for this nonsense."

"Oh. Sorry..."

At this moment, Ryūji could not find a reason to make people turn their heads towards him.

Taiga sat on her makeup chair, while Ami was seriously helping her with her makeup. Ami stuck loads of facial tissue in her coat pocket, while her finger carried many brushes and eyeshadow sticks, smearing and applying all sorts of material on Taiga's face again and again. Like a professional hairdresser, Ami would also occasionally take out some gel and placed hair clips on her collar, preparing to fix Taiga's bangs into place. Compared to the other noisy girls, this was on a completely different level altogether.

"Why's this all powdery... Ah-choo! Ah--- Tissue..."

"No! You'll wipe out the makeup on your nose that way!"

Completely ignoring Ami's protests, Taiga continued to press the buttons incessantly, until her nose started to become sensitive and she began to sniff non-stop.

The offices of the PE teachers located in the gymnasium were partitioned into many smaller sections with curtains, where the participants of the Campus Queen competition got changed and applied their makeup, with help from their female classmates, creating a lot of commotion. Though Ryūji was the only guy involved in this as well, no one seemed to have noticed at all, as everyone was busy with their own stuff. In essence , this has become a battlefield.

"Argh! There's only 15 minutes left!? I still need to practice my MC lines as well as my own makeup... Takasu-kun, is the costume ready?"

"I was waiting for you to say that. Thanks to the efforts of the sewing team, it's now complete."

Ryūji stood up and held the dress for everyone to see. Even the Sewing Club girls from Class 2-C looked towards Ryūji and applauded approvingly. "Wow!

Takasu-kun is amazing!" "Incredible! It looks so cute!" The reason there weren't any creases on the dress was because Ryūji had taken into consideration that there was no iron available, and so specifically chose a dress that would not wrinkle easily.

"Wow! This looks great!"

Ami's eyes glittered as she felt her fingers through the dress.

The triangular design would perfectly emphasize Taiga's miniature figure, since this dress doesn't incorporate a lot of Taiga's normally favourite ribbons and laces. The material was light and transparent silk. Layer upon layer of voile made the dress look elegant and graceful, just like a real princess.

Ryūji satisfyingly looked at the dress in his hands, looking completely pleased. Though he wouldn't go so far as to actually wear it himself, it does reflect his sense of beauty which was unique amongst the male high school students.

I found this back when I was tidying Taiga's cabinet. When he asked Taiga, "This is a very beautiful dress! How come you don't wear this?" The irresistible tailoring and

elegant design was so good that Ryūji was pretty much breathtaken, but Taiga's response was, "I bought it because I thought it was cute. But then I discovered it would expose the fact that I'm flat chested, so I didn't like it."

Hence for this Campus Queen competition, Ryūji, with assistance from other girls, made some slight modifications to the dress. The girls would help make long ribbons, which were obtained from the older silky clothes, while Ryūji would make small folds on the chest area, and then sew the light orange ribbons that the girls made onto the folds, just under the chest, and make a small bow. As adding chest pads would just damage the tailoring, Ryūji chose such a method instead, as this would not only emphasize Taiga's slim curves, it would also beautifully increase the volume around her chest.

"The theme for this dress would be... 'Juliet'... how romantic... how regal..."

Caressing the dress that he had completed, Ryūji's looks had gone beyond that of what a mammal should have. "So this is what Takasu-kun likes." "How surprising!" "He looks dangerous..." He didn't even notice that the girls, who were tidying up their sewing

equipment, were slowly starting to look at him with eyes that were no longer that of respect.

As this was the Campus Queen competition, a mere " Juliet" style dress wasn't enough to attract people's gazes, so Ryūji also prepared a special accessory for Taiga.

"And we're done when we add this at the back. Heh heh, they've got this in that Leonardo DiCaprio movie ' Romeo + Juliet', haven't they? Though I can't remember the exact details, but this is based on that scene!"

Ryūji added a silk ribbon behind the dress so Taiga could hang that behind her - a pair of angel wings. Though it wasn't big, one can still see it spreading cutely when looking in front of her. And where did he find such a thing? It actually belonged to a regular performer at the Bishamonten Kuni. When the drag queen first heard about this, his reaction was, "Campus Queen competition ? Wow! Won't that be exciting? Oh and while I may not look like it, I'm actually a woman as well! Though the operation didn't go as planned..." He then gave his pair of wings to Yasuko for free.

Ami had no idea where the wings came from, and merely applauded for them being cute.

"Hmm... I was right to let Takasu-kun be in charge of the costume. The makeup's pretty much finished as well. Come, lift your head, we need to apply some blush powder."

"Grr... really, what the hell is he doing, why isn't he answering!? Dammit... could something have happened? He couldn't have gotten caught in an accident, could he... "

Even now, Taiga was not looking at how Ami was helping with her makeup, but instead gripped onto her cellphone irritably and glared at its display screen. She didn't even bother to have a look at herself and her costume in the mirror. Ami proceeded to lift Taiga's face by herself and applied some blush powder on her cheeks, and finally removed the hair clips on her head one by one, and all this time Taiga ignored her. At last Ami parted Taiga's long hair in an accustomed way and took out a hair spray and began to spray from the inside of her hair.

"Kawashima-san, please be ready by the stageside! We're almost ready as well!"

"Okay~! Damn! There's no time! Taiga! Nanako-chan and Maya-chan will come over and make your hairstyle for you, you just tell them that Ami wants a 'gentle angel-like feel, with the parting on the left, but don't make it too obvious'! Argh! This pisses me off! I wanna to do that myself!"

Feeling unsatisfied, Ami finally began to pack up her cosmetic box. When Ryūji saw her acting in a way beyond his imagination, he couldn't help but say,

"I never thought you liked such backstage work. I always believed that you were the sort that couldn't stand not being the protagonist."

"I don't actually hate this backstage work. Helping people with their makeup is actually fun! But girls would usually like doing makeup, right? Maybe it has something to do with me seeing all those professional stylists at work all the time, so it's quite... By the way, what're you still doing here? We're about to get changed, so can you men please get out? And Taiga! You need to quickly get changed! Don't forget to tell Maya-chan about your hairdo!"

"Um..."

"Hey! Are you even listening? You've been like that since we started... You couldn't still be waiting for your dad, could you? He probably won't come. Ah... and Ami-chan thought she could meet him for once, what a shame~!"

"He'll come!"

Taiga said angrily as she lifted her head,

"He'll definitely come! He must be late because of work! That's why his phone isn't responding! Good thing he didn't see the wrestling show... that would be too embarrassing, thank goodness he's late... He'll come afterwards! Definitely!"

"Well, I guess, if you say so. But do you still want to use that stage introduction as planned when you come on? You sure you don't want to change? I can think of something else..."

"It's fine, that will do."

"But..."

Ami was trying to say something else...

"Kawashima-san! It'll be late if you don't hurry!"

"Coming--! Sorry, I'm on my way! Are you really sure? "

"I said it's fine! Ryūji thinks so as well, right? That person will come, right? Because we promised each other , so he'll certainly come... He's not sick or in an accident, right...?"

Looking at Ryūji, Taiga suddenly showed some doubt on her face.

"I'm not an esper, how should I know? ... But if he's really in an accident, he should've called already, right?"

"Yeah! That's what I think too!"

Hearing the organizing committee member rushing her, Ami grabbed her stuff and left without saying anything else, dragging Ryūji's hand along the way and leading him out as the girls began to get changed.

"Thanks for your help! I'm counting on you to help drum up the atmosphere within the audience~"

Tee hee! Ami shrugged and ran towards the committee member. Now it was Maya and Nanako's turn to enter the garden of ladies with their large mirrors and combs.

"Phew..."

Ryūji sighed to himself, and walked alone in the empty gymnasium corridor. The storm-like preparations had finally come to an end, and he suddenly felt fatigued in his back and shoulders. The depression that was momentarily dispelled as he rushed to finish the dress was now returning again.

The whole class knew that after the pro-wrestling show was over, Taiga would have to prepare for the Campus Queen competition. The whole class was supposed to know, and yet Minori never once appeared in the preparation area, so all the preparation was done by Ryūji, Ami and the other girls. *She was Taiga's best friend, and yet she didn't even come to show her concern. Though Ami would say, "What would she come for? ...That sporty girl would just get in the way anyway!"* But she should at least just come and give Taiga some encouragement, shouldn't she? If she could have said something, maybe Taiga could've relaxed a bit.

Ryūji began thinking about things he didn't want to think about - *Taiga's dad still hasn't appeared. Would Minori be thinking, "See? I told you so!" When she sees Taiga frantically looking at her cellphone and me trying to calm her down, would she be thinking, "Serves you right! I've already told you... If he doesn't come, it means I wasn't wrong..."*

I don't want to think of her as such a person.

"Hurry up and come... Taiga's dad..."

Ryūji began talking to himself, and rigidly swung his stiff shoulders, and so accidentally smacked himself into a wall and had to kneel down in pain. He lifted his pathetic face and rubbed his arm with his dry hands, wondering about how Taiga's father would appear...

He'll surely arrive driving that silver convertible.

Slinging his jacket over his shoulder, he would shrug his shoulder and say, "Sorry I'm late!"

Taiga would then grumpily say to him, "You're late!" But would still reveal a shy but cheerful smile.

"You'll surely come, right? No matter how late you are, you'll think of some way to rush over here, right? Because you're her dad, you're Taiga's dad..."

Heroes often arrive late.

Ryūji breathed a deep breath, and slowly stood up. *Noto should've reserved a seat for me by now.* As though trying to walk past the obstacle ahead of him, he began to walk in huge strides.

In any case, if he can't even come to a Campus Queen competition - then he most certainly deserves a kick in the nuts .

* * *

Flash! The spotlights shone at the stage from three different directions.

"... Sorry to keep everyone waiting!"

It happened the moment the MC entered the stage with a mic in hand.

The packed gymnasium began to rumble - mixed with deafening cheers and applause, as well as the tremor caused by many people jumping in excitement, the sounds echoing all over the gymnasium.

"Ow! My ears...!"

Ryūji was forced to cover his ears and lower his face to protect himself, but Noto, who was sitting next to him...

"OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, OHHHHHH MY GOOOOOOD-----!!!!! AMI-CHAAAAAAAAAN---------!!!!!"

Had already started jumping up and down enthusiastically like an excited puppy dog, punching his fists in the air and swinging his head while screaming wildly.

"N, Noto... Noto!"

"AHHHHH----!!!!! AMI-CHAN!!! KU-WA-SHI-MA!!! AHHHH-----!!!!! AHH---!!! AHHHHH-----!!!!!"

"Noto, calm down! Get ahold of yourself! You'll blow a blood vessel that way!"

Ryūji patted Noto on the back, trying to calm him down, but his friend had already let his excitement get to his head. His glasses had slid down to his chin, his heart instantaneously linked with the other guys, and danced wildly in that narrow seat of his, not caring whether he would get hurt. Ryūji's foot was repeatedly stomped on by Noto, causing him to wince in pain.

"Hee hee hee! You should all keep quiet, okay~?"

The foldable chairs lined up closely were all occupied, there were even people standing. Ami accepted her applause as a matter-of-factly, her sweet and beautiful face revealing a somewhat troubled smile.

That costume is too low-handed of you! Aren't you supposed to be the MC!? Ryūji wasn't dazzled, but was rather feeling helpless. *What's with this "I don't actually*

hate this backstage work" nonsense!? She was basically born to indulge in all this adulation and admiration, listening to people singing her praises!

How was it that Ami managed to change into a different appearance so quickly? First, her gentle smile on her pretty face, which was soaked under the spotlight, revealed the glittering makeup on her face. As expected of a professional model, her wet lips sparkled like pearls, the light-coloured eye shadows allowed her shining chihuahua eyes to reveal their purity. Yet her gaze beamed with infinite charm, by moving her gaze a bit, it would look as though she was telling a tale from far, far away. Ami's beauty was too dramatic, her shiny hair emphasized her feminine curves, what was frightening was that even her shadow was giving off the same beautiful scent.

And then there's the costume that she's wearing on her slim and elegant figure, which was the true reason for driving everyone, including Noto, absolutely crazy, and the source for Ryūji's speechlessness.

"Umm~ Oh my, if you aren't quiet, then I'm going to have to punish you~

"

She said as she lashed her whip. Standing on the stage of a public high school was a dominatrix.

She wore a pair of 10cm-tall high-heeled shoes.

Her netted stockings looked as though they form part of her skin, the dark netting perfectly accentuated her white skin even more.

A garter belt linked her stockings with her black leather catsuit. Though her thighs were small, they could still be seen from the sides of her panties. The curves created from the leather suit tightly wrapping her buttocks were so dangerously sexy that no one dared look directly at them. The ribbons in front of the suit were neatly tied up all the way to her neck, though there was a blank space in the upper chest area, provocatively revealing her cleavage - Two white spherical objects were squeezed tightly together and altered in shape as a result, appearing in this blank space of infinite sexiness.

Besides those, there were her excessively beautiful armpits, and her marble-like arms. Not to mention her leather gloves, which extended from her hands all the

way to her elbows, enhanced her seductiveness. Suddenly, Ami's smile disappeared-

"Haven't I told you to shut up already!? You bunch of worthless pigs!"

CRACK! The whip lashed in the air and cracked as it hit the ground.

That yelling was not part of her acting, that was the real Ami. By making such a violent outburst, she brilliantly demonstrated how black-hearted she really was. Ryūji began to shiver.

"Ah... sensei, I wanna be part of the floor...!"

"Hit me~! ... Ahhh, hit me... I want to be hit! Hit me badly~!"

"Even as a pig, I'll gladly do it! As long as I can get near Ami-chan!"

The audience had been stunned to the point of revealing their submissive masochistic nature, pathetically declaring their eternal fealty to Queen Ami.

"You want me to hit you hard? You shameless and filthy pigs! You should all sit down quietly like the ugly pigs that you are! After all, you're just pork meat if you can't even fly---!"

Ahhh~ ... The gymnasium was filled with the sound of swooning and drooling, yet everyone still obediently suppressed their screams, because their queen had told them to. Noto, who was at the verge of insanity, was now looking with lecherous eyes,

"Ami-chan's thighs... Ami-chan's violence... Amazing! This is too amazing! My mind is now filled with new desires..."

As though dreaming, he wrapped his body like a baby as he sat bedazzled on his chair.

Only Ryūji remained calm - Or rather, he was skeptically trying to get out of this whirlpool of madness as he gazed at the MC Queen. *The atmosphere is indeed incredible, but...*

"... Just kidding~

! Really, that was all a joke, so don't take it seriously, okay~? Please continue to keep things excited! Now then, I will now explain the voting rules! We will first have the candidates introduce themselves one by one, and then we will have one person one vote..."

... Why is the MC the one taking all the spotlight instead? Wouldn't things be boring from here onwards?

In her dominatrix queen outfit, Ami began to speedily explain the voting rules, though no one was really listening, as their eyes were all fixed on her cleavage, long legs and armpits, as well as the pale white skin that can be seen beneath her netted stockings.

With the change in the BGM, Ami moved towards the microphone on the other side of the stage, and the audience moved their gaze as well.

"Now let us begin! Starting with No. 1! From Class 1-A ..."

A pale skinned, tiny and cute first year girl walked onto stage with her costume for the school festival.

People can't help but feel that they've seen her greeting customers before, as she was wearing a maid uniform. Just as the audience were thinking *She's gonna say it*...

"Welcome back, master!"

She smiled nervously and said. *She said it!* The crowd erupted in applause, though the mood didn't feel right. Maybe it had something to do with their eyes all clearly fixed on the MC.

"Her specialty is welcoming her master home! Claiming to be good enough to earn a 1st class certificate for maids! The performance this beautiful maid has prepared for today is 'Rock-Paper-Scissors'! Now everyone! Let's play--!"

Standing by the side of the stage and attempting to drive up the atmosphere, Ami the MC simply looked too dazzling, both in looks and in attire. Such was the difference between a professional and an amateur.

The first year maid didn't notice that the mood looked strange, and continued happily,

"Now let us begin our 'Rock-Paper-Scissors' game--! Well~ the rules of this game in the Class 1-A maid cafe are..."

She began dancing left and right, singing some strange and campy song, and then shouted "Hey!" and raised her fist. The only people who followed her movements were a few girls... Most probably girls from her class.

"How sad... It's all because Ami-chan is just too attractive! Or rather, the executive committee chose the wrong person to be MC to begin with."

Even Noto, who finally came to his senses, looked sympathetically towards the first year girl. *I feel the same way too...* Ryūji applauded loudly and sent her off from this strange atmosphere.

But the first year student that came afterward was also ...

"W, welcome back, master."

Saying the same stuff.

"Just how many maids do we have in our school anyway!?"

"Leaving that aside, is that all they ever say?"

Neither Ryūji, Noto, nor any of the audience could get excited by this. Though this junior schoolmate was indeed cute, with her distinctive cateye and fluttering short hair, as well as legs as slim as a baby lamb from beneath her mini-skirt. She's probably the prettiest of the first year girls, but as everyone got used to seeing maids, plus that greeting of "Welcome back" was getting old, all the audience could say was "Is that all?" Not to mention she was completely outshone by the MC.

"Takasu, did you know? We have like eight classes doing maid cafes this year... I went to four of them... but just requesting them to write 'Noto' with tomato ketchup on my omelet rice cost me 300 yen extra..."

"And I was wondering where you've gone to, so that's what you've been doing."

"Yeah, I was visiting these maid cafes. Where have you gone to? Were you hanging out with Kitamura? Haruta and I were looking for you for so long, thinking of hanging around with you."

"I was with Taiga and Kitamura, having lunch in a third year stall, we even bought crepes... oh yeah, we even went to the Chemistry Club's annual mashmallow stall, though it was sold out when we came to the front of the queue." (TL: Marshmallow is just a guess, I have no idea what the real term in English is, please double check .)

"That's because their marshmallows are popular every year. I went as well, and even bought some as presents. Before my sister graduated from here, she used to love these. I still got some with me, want some?"

"Really? Sure!"

Without realizing, Ryūji was now chatting happily with his friend. When he noticed, he quickly lowered his voice apologetically.

"Oh, your phone's ringing."

The cellphone in his pocket, which he had set to silent mode, began to vibrate. Ryūji quickly pulled the phone by its handstrap. *The Campus Queen tournament is on right now, I don't think now's the right time...* Though Ryūji was worried, but he noticed other people were taking out their own cellphones and taking pictures of the stage nonstop. *If that's the case, I'm sure it's fine for me to check my messages, right?* As Ryūji flipped his phone open, the maid on the stage was singing a song out of tune.

"Oh my... Poor girl... I think I'll vote for this junior as a consolation..."

In that time~ At this time~ Seeing the maid singing was heart wrenching, and the feeling of helplessness and sympathy quickly spread throughout the entire hall.

"Are you crazy? You should save that vote for Taiga. This will affect our class's overall ranking, you know?"

Though she was pitiable, Ryūji still stopped Noto and reminded him of this. "Heh heh heh..." Noto let it pass with a silly smile. Regardless of whether she was nervous or was just naturally a bad singer, the maid on stage

continued with her out of tune song. Out of courtesy, Ryūji gave a quick glance at the stiff maid before looking at the screen on his phone.

As he looked at the screen...

Within the dark space, the screen shone dazzlingly.

The words on it clearly reflected into his eyes. There was no way he could have read it wrong or misinterpreted it. Everything turned into words and entered Ryūji's retina.

The title was "I'm sorry".

The sender was "Aisaka (Father)".

The first line read, "Hi".

"Hey, Takasu, when is Taiga coming on? Are they gonna follow the class ordering?"

"Um..."

Everything suddenly fell silent.

There's something I'd like you to tell Taiga.

"Nope, it's now a third year that's coming on. Whoa! A yukata! And she's hot as well!"

"Uh-huh..."

Due to work, I have no choice but to leave.

"Oh, so she's from the Tea Ceremony Club. I never knew we had such a senior. She looks elegant!"

"....."

So I don't think I can come today. I'm sorry, I'll make it up for her someday. By the way, there's something else...

"By the way, Ami's stolen the scene again! Oh, that whipping girl!"

"....."

You know what I said about living together with Taiga ? Forget I ever said that.
Because of my work, I can't have a divorce yet.
So I have to continue my current marriage.
Please tell her to occasionally come eat with me.
I'm counting on you to tell my little Princess. Thanks.

"Takasu...?"

... All this for work!?

If it were some urgent business, or a client came to see him, or even if he had gotten ill - if it was because of these reasons that he couldn't come to the school festival, it was still acceptable.

No matter how Taiga looked forward to it, how she wanted to see her father, how she believed that he would

keep his promise, if it were for these reasons, then it can't be helped. Because her father was an adult, no matter how important his daughter was to him, he couldn't just place his daughter's school festival ahead of things that were happening before him. Ryūji would understand these, and so would Taiga.

But...

Ryūji never thought Taiga's father would do this, he never imagined that Taiga's father would actually do such a thing... It never even entered his mind.

"Takasu? What's wrong? Hey..."

"....."

Ryūji finally understood the true meaning of "being stunned into silence".

He took a deep breath, as his body was stiff as though he was wearing metal armour. His raised eyebrows and wide opened eyes all stopped moving upon reading the first line in the message, and were unable to move anymore.

Too shocking, just too shocking.

Ryūji was really stunned, because he completely didn't understand, he couldn't comprehend what this was all about, what this all meant, nor did he know what he should do.

He didn't know how he should face Taiga, when faced with such a message, and with his own beliefs. Because there was no one to tell him the answer.

"Hey, are you alright? You look terrible..."

Noto shook Ryūji's shoulder with his hand. Ryūji wanted to tell him "I'm fine", but he didn't even know whether he should open his mouth.

The pretty yukata girl on the stage was reciting a prose using every syllabic kana, causing the audience to giggle in laughter. The Campus Queen tournament was once again getting exciting.

Ryūji kept staring at his cellphone screen, nothing else could get into his vision anymore. But he seemed to believe that things might change if he continued to stare into it. And so he just stared at that dazzling screen. But nothing changed, and only the "truth" was placed before his eyes:

Taiga's father not only ran away from the school festival, he even ran away from everything related to Taiga, he chose to escape from it all.

Ryūji's eyes could only see this truth.

"W, why did I believe him..."

He said with a voice as sharp as a child, and grabbed his chest tightly... *Why did I believe him? Why did I single-handedly decide that this was a "good thing" without giving it any second thought!? Why did I not listen to what Taiga wanted to say!?* Ryūji was subconsciously clawing his chest painfully, but he could not feel any pain.

In the end it was all for nothing.

Only the pain caused by me remains.

Ryūji thought back o the pain that he has caused - the figure of Taiga wavering appeared in his head. It was the figure he saw after he had persuaded her, and the figure with which she then ran towards her father and hugged him under the streetlamp. She was thrilled yet shy at the same time.

Taiga was happy, really happy, and she constantly looked cheerful and blessed... Upon seeing such a Taiga, Ryūji would feel really lonely.

It was because he felt lonely that a despicable thought was spawned. Ryūji had a thought which even he himself did dare not face - How he had wished Taiga's father had never appeared. In this way, they would continue their lives with the three of them together as usual, with Taiga relying on him, needing him, pouting on him, and he could convince himself that "it was right to come to this world". He felt everything was taken away from him, he felt he was no longer needed, so he felt lonely, and he hated that. As Ryūji had felt glimpses of such thoughts before, he convinced himself that "this was a good thing".

That's right.

It's not that I trust Taiga's dad that I let her return to him.

I was doing this for myself, but I pretended it was for Taiga's sake.

I wanted to use Taiga to make up for what's missing in my life, that's why I threatened her about "planning to discard something which I could never get".

Ryūji believed as long as Taiga could have happiness with her father, he could atone for his sin for being the reason Yasuko couldn't return to her parents. Though Taiga has no relation with Yasuko whatsoever, he only needed one chance for atonement, then he would feel redeemed, and would no longer think of himself as a child nobody wants, coming to this world by mistake.

Yet deep in his heart he genuinely wanted Taiga's father to disappear, hoping Taiga would stay forever by his side, to confirm his raison d'être.

How can I be so stupid? How can I be so nonsensically selfish and self-centred?

And this is how God punished me as a result.

How should I tell Taiga?

Like the impact of a storm, Ryūji's heart and lungs were frozen stiff like a corpse. He couldn't think, his fingers couldn't move, his ears couldn't hear anything.

"Now then~! The next contestant hails from Class 2-C, I'm sure you all know her better if I call her the 'Palmtop Tiger', right? As expected... let us welcome Aisaka Taiga--!"

Whoo-hoo! The audience clapped and murmured. "The Palmtop Tiger's here!" "She's really taking part!?" "Are you sure we don't need fences? Wouldn't that be dangerous!?" The excited audience now gave Taiga their most enthusiastic response so far.

"Um, Takasu... It's Taiga's turn..."

Noto looked confusingly at Ryūji, who still clutched tightly at his cellphone and widened his big eyes.

He didn't even notice that the crowd had gone silent.

She... The girl who looked slightly nervous walked onto the stage.

The thin silk suited her footsteps, which seemed to glide in the air.

The angel wings behind her flapped softly.

Her long hair growing to her waist fluttered like soothing music, together with her loose hair ribbon.

Her slim body wrapped inside the dress looked so fragile it could break.

Her lowered brows cast a shadow over her face. Maybe it could an illusion, but her fine glass-sculpture-like face seemed to constantly stay down.

Taiga's soft footsteps were like ripples.

In this silence, her striding was like wind being blown.

Like a clear visage about to dissolve into honey, no one dared to make a sound.

Everyone felt like protecting this dream-like butterfly that just came out of her cocoon, fearing to damage her beauty, and held their breath as they looked on.

"No way..."

Someone said softly.

"S, so cute..."

As for Ryūji...

"Well! Today Aisaka-san's father also came specifically to cheer for her today! Can Aisaka-san's father please come forward to say a few words for your daughter--?"

Ami held her mic in one hand and waved with her other hand, her eyes looked a bit concerned as she looked towards the audience.

Taiga stood in the middle of the stage, withdrawing her feathers, biting her lips uncomfortably as she waited. But her eyes still believed that somewhere out there, someone would cry out for her.

Time passed by unbelievably slowly.

"Um... well... that..."

Ami couldn't help but make some sounds. Taiga's father, who was supposed to cheer for her, was not in the hall. The awkward pause led to murmurs appearing within the crowd, not praises for the beautiful angel, but doubts. "He's not even here!" "Hurry up and continue!"

Taiga's wings shook a bit.

Ryūji saw it.

Taiga.

Taiga...

"Takasu...!?"

Ryūji stood up, kicking his chair back. Taiga saw Ryūji's eyes, and they exchanged glances. Upon seeing Ryūji clutching his cellphone, she quickly understood more than anyone else what was going on. When she saw Ryūji's expression, she momentarily gave a dejected look, like a baby about to cry.

Taiga lowered her head, painfully closing her eyes.

Her actions were as though saying that she understood everything - Her father didn't come, and wouldn't be picking her up. Yet for some reason she didn't seem surprised. Her closed eyes looked as though they were saying, "If that's the case, then there's nothing in this world worth looking at."

Her small shoulders lost their energy, and her wings drooped. The fallen feathers fell in place of tears onto her feet.

Ryūji couldn't do anything. Taiga was too far on the stage, he couldn't reach out to her even if he tried, neither could he drag her father here.

Taiga seemed ready to escape from the stage where everyone was looking.

As she turned with her back towards the audience, ready to leave with her head down, no one had thought that Taiga would still be so clumsy even in this moment.

"WHOA...!?"

OHHH! The audience gasped as well. Taiga's high heeled shoes had stepped on her own dress now of all times. Losing her balance, Taiga fell forward by her own weight, just like that in the centre of the stage.

"Ugh...!"

"U-wah... midget Taiga..."

THUD! Taiga landed face flat in a sound Ryūji and Ami couldn't bear to hear. Her dress fell forward, revealing her entire thigh. Even the other contestants, standing by the side of the stage, were scared stiff by such a scene. Nobody moved, and simply watched what was happening before their eyes.

The sudden accident had left everyone speechless, and the gymnasium fell dead silent.

"Ow... oww..."

Only Taiga muttering echoed throughout. As she couldn't bring herself get up yet, she could only attempt to straighten her dress, but the dress was broken, and was ripped all the way to her thighs, which meant she couldn't cover her pale white thighs even if she wanted

to. It was an embarrassing sight to behold, and people couldn't help but sigh at her misfortune.

What should I do? Being struck by lightning as divine punishment, and impaled by his own self-hatred, once his scales are fixed to the ground, not even the dragon could fly or flap his wings to create wind. As a dog, Ryūji was even more useless, and he was completely at a loss on what to do. He already felt like crying out loud... *All this is happening to Taiga, and all I can do is stand here...*

"Ugh..."

Taiga finally raised her head.

Whether it was embarrassment, or she was too emotionally stricken, her face was redder than blood, and she could only tearfully bite her lips and sniff her nose.

The dog that could do nothing shouted in his heart - *There are now two choices for you.*

The first choice is to cry right there, waiting for someone to give her a hand. Who knows, the lights could suddenly go out and someone would come rescue her, taking her away from what will become the casual talk for days to come.

Besides that, there is a second choice.

And that is to get up with her own two feet.

Just like that, carrying her wounds and shame, finding a balance between everyone's gazes and her own emotions, and think of something. Even if it were done clumsily, even if her wounds were to crack open, even if it won't be successful, no matter how painful or badly it turns out, she must think of a way to get up and walk forward.

Which choice would you take?

Taiga, which choice would you take...

"Ah... really..."

The mumbling was faint.

The lighting was strong.

Strong and more dazzling than anything else around. Like stars bathing under the spotlight, Taiga's eyes came back to life. The wings in her back shook for a while, her displeased eyes gave a ferocious stare and moved her body a bit, like how an animal would shake its head after just waking up.

"This... SUCKS!"

She then ripped off the end of her long skirt without hesitation, leading to gasps within the audience. Amidst the audience drawing their breaths, Taiga lifted her chin matter-of-factly and puffed her chest as proudly as before, rubbing her red kneecaps and slowly picked herself up.

She stood up.

"I won't be beaten so easily," She muttered. Her expression was twisted and her tears were concentrated in her eye sockets, but she still stepped forward back towards the stage. Now wearing a cute mini-skirt, this Campus Queen contestant, whose repute was higher than anyone else, walked forward step by step.

"She did it..."

Ryūji could feel Taiga's wings were breaking the waves and sailing forward.

Though the wind wasn't strong enough, and he was worried she might not fly.

"Takasu?"

At this moment, within the rowdy and chaotic crowd, Ryūji, on his own...

Began to clap his hands.

He clapped with all his might, so that it echoed across the whole gymnasium.

That was the wind.

This is the wind I am giving to you.

"Hey, that's the delinquent Takasu."

"Oh yeah, he's cheering for his partner."

-- Ignoring those whispers, he stood and continued with his clapping, all this for the girl walking with pride, all this for Aisaka Taiga, Ryūji would send her his wind, and his utmost compliments, he would even give her encouraging cheers, "Come on! Hang in there!"

"Hmm... maybe we should cheer for her as well! She's cute, after all!"

"That's right! Anyway, Long Live the Palmtop Tiger!"

"The Palmtop Tiger is invincible! Not even her clumsiness can stop her!"

The clapping began to spread like ripples from around Ryūji. Noto, the unknown person next to him, and the next person onwards, one by one they began to stand up and cheered for Taiga. The students of Class 2-C certainly did their best to applaud, and even the dominatrix MC smiled and placed her mic under her arm to join in with the clapping, while whistling to drive up the crowd. Everyone was applauding for this beautiful, dangerous, and hopelessly clumsy Campus Queen contestant. The applause had turned into the wind which would steadily push Taiga ever forward.

Just as the whole gymnasium was filled with applause --

"TAIIIIIGAAAAAA--!!!!!!!!"

A sudden yell filled the hall, but it wasn't Ryūji.

"TAIGA! LISTEN UP--!!! No matter when! No matter what! YOU'RE THE BEST--!!! EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE OKAY--!!!"

The voice was a bit hoarse, so that person stopped to catch her breath.

It was Kushieda Minori. She stood on a chair at the last row, preparing to yell again, but she started to cough and couldn't make any sound, so Ryūji took over for her,

"TAIIIIIGAAAAAA--!!!!! GOOD JOB! YOU GO GIRL!!! HANG IN THERE---!!!!!"

Noto and the others all looked astonishingly at Ryūji, but Ryūji didn't stop, and took turns yelling with Minori, telling her to not give up, cheering for her while standing up and cheering with all they've got.

They both believed Taiga made the right decision.

Even if you fall down, life goes on and you must still continue moving forward. No matter what happens, no matter how painful it'll be, no matter how much you're betrayed, how useless you feel, as long as you're alive, you must continue to get up and move forward. No matter how many times you fall, no matter how exhausted you are from getting up, you must still move

forward, whether you're crying or smiling while at it, you must still rely on your own two feet, and walk on down the path that you have chosen.

That is our reason for living.

Living with her incredible endurance, Taiga frowned her very red face, and rubbed her rather painful elbows and knees as she walked onto the stage. The feathers on her wings continued to fall like a layer of snow on the path Taiga had walked on. Ryūji continued to cheer full on, "That's good! Keep it up!" The applause in the audience continued to grow louder, whistles and cries of "Palmtop Tiger" could be heard.

Yet as she came before the mic, Taiga scowled and screamed with the tip of her voice:

"SHUT--- UUUUUUUUUUUUUUP---!!!!!"

She leaned forward while holding the mic like Yazawa Eikichi, standing wildly with her legs open under that torn skirt. Just as everyone wondered what she was going to say--

"Who cares about things like fathers? They can get chopped up and sent to the Morgue!!!"

Oooooo... The crowd gasped and leaned backwards, and then whispered understandingly, "As expected from the Palmtop Tiger, the strongest and most dangerous animal of all. Even her relations are filled with bloodshed ."

Taiga seemed to throw everything out the window as she got here.

"Now time for some self-introduction! Hey, dumbass! Where's the stuff that you got prepared!?"

"Y, yes ma'am!"

The "dumbass" Haruta was already sitting at the front row with the prop ready in hand. The object he tossed onto the stage was a Boston bag. *Just what is she up to?* After unzipping the bag, Taiga elegantly rolled her body

in a smaller shape than usual and crawled neatly into the bag. And then coming from the bag--

"ZIP IT--!!!"

Maybe she was too ferocious, a contestant timidly came over and anxiously zipped up the big. The audience once again gave their generous applause for Taiga's slick performance.

Perhaps out of consideration, the first year contestant proceeded to pick up the bag, leading to an even louder applause--

"DON'T PICK IT UP--!!!"

"Eek!"

For Taiga, it seemed like picking up the bag wasn't part of the show. A few seconds after the bag was placed back on the floor,

"OPEN IT--!!!"

The first year maid quickly unzipped the bag. Flicking her hair, Taiga emerged from within with a pompous look,

"Hmph! Not bad, eh? You should feel honoured to serve me, maid!"

She proudly puffed her chest and intimidated the girl... *Wasn't it just a while ago that she was as pathetic as a frog that got run down by a car...?*

The time had come for the votes to be announced.

No one had thought that the conceited roadkill frog tiger with her angel wings had really become the Campus Queen. Her victory was attributed to her amazing trip, as well as her imitation of a certain incredibly underweight comedian by crawling into a Boston bag. (Referring to Esper Ito - http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E3%82%A8%E3%82%B9%E3%83%91%E3%83%BC%E4%BC%8A%E6%9D%B1)

This time no one doubted her anymore, and gave her their unanimous applause. Taiga scowled and returned once more to the centre of the stage, and sat on the throne under the guidance of the executive committee members.

All this time Ryūji watched her from under the stage. Taiga faced forward, proudly lifting her chin, but she was still alone. Looking down at everyone's gazes, there was no one to come hug her, or anyone to come take her home.

Taiga is sitting there alone all by herself.

"Takasu...? Hey, what're you doing!? Hey!?"

Ryūji wanted to go to Taiga's side, even if it's just to pull their distance a bit closer. He was ready to climb through row after row of seats-- Though he knew he wasn't exactly the person she was expecting, though he knew that there was no way he could really mend that wound in Taiga's heart.

Yet even if there's a gaping hole in her heart, he felt he could still be a pillar that could continue to support her, and now was the time to do so. Ryūji pushed the shoulders of the audience in front of him, attempting to climb forward one step at a time. Seeing how this could inconvenience others, Noto quickly held onto Ryūji's shoulder,

"Like I said, it's useless! Oh, I'm sorry, sorry... See? Even I'm getting blamed here!"

It was only now that the gymnasium felt so huge. Even when Ryūji scowled with a villainous face, he couldn't get past those packed seats, and Noto's grip was surprisingly strong...

"Taiga..."

He felt his heart breaking.

He didn't know what he should do, but he felt that as long as he could get to Taiga's side, he could find the answer. *I just want to get beside the lonely Taiga, even one step closer, one centimetre closer.*

At this moment,

"Ladies and gentlemen! Now for our final tournament! "

A girl's voice blasted across the hall with a powerful big brother-like tone. Ryūji couldn't help but stop in his struggle to get forward.

* * *

"AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

Six people appeared on stage.

In their uniforms, they all wore a bright red armband and stood horizontally across the stage.

In the centre holding a mic and laughing merrily was the spiritual leader of this school's students, the living legend, and down-to-earth big brother...

"I see y'all are in a great mood! Now then, it's time for this year's Campus King tournament!"

It was none other than the perfect Student Council president, Kanou Sumire.

Standing still by her right was the ever loyal vice president, Kitamura Yūsaku. Standing just right behind

in a single row were the council committee members. As for the festival executive committee members who wore green armbands, they all stood behind in another row.

After the euphoria of the Campus Queen competition, they began to murmur uncontrollably -- "Now what?" " Looks like a Campus King competition is about to start." "But we haven't even got any candidates!"

"Heh" - A smile appeared on Sumire's face, which halted the noise made by the crowd.

"The criteria for choosing the Campus King will be... This!"

In cue with Sumire's hand sign, the council members pulled down a rope hanging from the ceiling, which seemed to have come down when no one was noticing. *CLAP!* A huge glitter ball split open, and as the ticker-tapes flew around, a huge piece of paper unrolled itself before everyone's eyes--

"...OW!"

And hit on the head of a naturally unlucky council member. As he bent down in pain, Sumire shoved him off and purposely read out loudly the paper's contents which everyone else could see:

"This year we'll be choosing a... 'Mr Lucky Guy'!"

Lucky Guy... What the hell's that?

The brainwaves of the entire audience seemed to have gone into sync at the same time as they all tilted their heads in confusion. Even Ryūji, whom Noto had tried very hard to keep in between the seat rows, had tilted his head. Stepping forward, Kitamura took the mic and explained,

"The origin of 'Mr Lucky Guy' came from the annual Fuku Otoko (literally Lucky Guy) race held during the Toka Ebisu festival every January 10th by the Nishinomiya Shrine in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture to celebrate. I'm sure you've read or heard about it from the news before, right? Every year a lot of people would gather outside the shrine gates at the dawn of January 10th, and when the gates open, they would race up 230 metres of stone steps towards the main shrine. The first three to arrive would be awarded the '

First Fuku', 'Second Fuku' and 'Third Fuku' prizes, and the winner of the 'First Fuku' would be known as 'Fuku Otoko', or 'Lucky Guy'. In other words - right now the race is to be prepared in the sports field, anyone who wishes to participate please meet at the starting point there! The first to arrive there would be the 'Lucky Guy', in other words, the 'Campus King'!"

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nishinomiya_Shrine, http://www.japannavigator.com/2007/01/10/toka-ebisu-in-ebisu-shrine-kyoto/)

Upon hearing Kitamura's explanation of the rules--

"Running in the school festival? No way!"

The boos were louder than the cheers. Some of the guys, which seemed to agree, began complaining,

"How come the girls only have to sing on stage while we guys have to run!?"

"Why do we guys get to do all the troublesome stuff!?"

The complaints became boos as well, and were directed at the members of the student council. But standing tall, Sumire merely smiled coldly and endured their grumblings.

"You don't have to participate if you don't want to. This is a free event after all."

"Then nobody's gonna participate!"

"That's right. Let's go!"

The audience was obviously not interested, and were beginning to leave. However--

"First, the winner of the Lucky Guy award will have the right to have a dance with our Campus Queen of the year Aisaka Taiga in tonight's bonfire night. Second, he will win the right to crown the Campus Queen."

The Campus Queen crown was brought before everyone's eyes in a trolley, with a council member carefully holding it up. The winner does get to dance with the Campus Queen, but Taiga could very well refuse to dance-- Thinking about that, many more disinterested people began leaving.

"Hey, there seems to be something else up there!"

"A huge bag of stuff!"

Shining underneath the Campus Queen crown, which seemed to be borrowed from somewhere, was a heavy mysterious looking cloth bag. Sumire smiled and continued,

"Oh, I nearly forgot... This comes with the crown, a shopping bag made by Kanou Groceries which you would only normally get when you spend up to 3000 yen . As for what's inside... well, I'm just trying to recycle stuff that I no longer need, old stuff that I've been keeping for three years. These are my study notes since April of my first year, including all exam papers, answers, explanations... I must say I can be surprisingly serious, since all notes from every class, every question asked by the teachers and their answers, and all essays organized... They're all well preserved here. Sigh, though it wouldn't be good to dump them all away, but I do wish that before I graduate, I would be able to show this happy couple, the Campus Queen and Lucky Guy, the testament of how I studied these past three years..."

The mood instantly changed, and the boos quickly dispersed.

"Big Brother Kanou's study notes...?"

"All past exam papers...?"

"Notes, questions, answers, essays...!?"

"The testament of study of 'that' Student Council president, who scored first in school ever since she enrolled with full marks!?"

The crowd was growing more and more excited. Even some of those planning to go home decided to return to their seats to see what else they could find out. Especially those with poor grades, as well as those third years in danger of repeating, who were secretly discussing whether to participate. *The studying tools of the genius Kanou Sumire... This prize is way too attractive!* Though there were also some within the excited crowds thinking along the lines of...

"Eh!? People are actually joining? No way! T, then the part about dancing with the Palmtop Tiger is also true, right? But in the end we could get refused by her, right? Right!?"

"Well, that's what I thought as well... Um~~ What if she couldn't refuse?"

"Is that even possible!?"

"Maybe it's because I heard people are interested in joining, so I'm feeling a bit anxious... Let's put aside whether we could dance with the Tiger, don't you think it's great to be able to photocopy notes with her?"

"Become friends with the Tiger..."

"Maybe it is true..."

Some of the boys under the stage began glancing at Taiga, who stood behind the student council members. Though she heard Sumire mention her name, she didn't get angry or rebut Sumire at all, but simply sat quietly on her chair. Notwithstanding her true nature, as long as she didn't go ballistic, there was indeed nothing else that was cuter than Taiga.

"That's it, I'm in!"

"No way!? Are you serious!?"

"Right, I'm in as well! My target is 'First Fuku'!"

More and more contestants appeared, some even gathered to discuss their strategies,

"As the Athletic Team, it wouldn't be good for us if we were to lose to any other club!"

"Right! Our aim is to beat the Athletic Team! Now's our chance to show them what the Basketball Team is made of!"

"Soccer Team members, gather up! We'll use our elegant tackles to defeat everyone else!"

"Heh heh heh! Now's the time for us to end the Soccer Team once and for all! Calling all Five-a-side Soccer Interest Club members!"

None of the sports teams were willing to lose to amateurs in this tournament, so they all gathered up, aiming to win the Lucky Guy crown.

"I also want Big Brother's notes!"

"Each class is only allowed to send one person to participate in the Campus Queen tournament, so why is it the guys can freely join the Campus King one!? That's not fair!"

The girls began to grumble. Seeing the guys getting all fired up, Sumire held her mic with one hand and said on stage,

"Though the title starts with 'Mr', this tournament is free for all regardless of gender! We would also welcome girls to take part! Now! If you've decided to join, meet up in the athletic track in the sports field outside--!"

YEAH! The deep roars of the guys were mixed with the cheers of the girls.

Ryūji could be seen amongst the student that were heading outside to gather.

Ryūji was not interested in Big Brother's notes.

Neither was he interested in the title of "Lucky Guy".

Though it wasn't too bad to be able to dance with Taiga.

He only wanted to reach Taiga earlier than anyone else . No matter what, no matter how, he only wanted to quickly rush towards Taiga, who was sitting there all alone, and be by her side.

Chapter 7

Amongst the people gathered at the starting point in the athletic track field, there were already forty to fifty boys as well as a dozen or so girls.

It was near evening, and an icy autumn wind blew past the field. There were a lot of spectators standing by the side of the track field, clapping their hands and waiting for the race to begin. At the finishing point where the spotlights gathered was Taiga, who sat on a chair wearing a red cardigan, while protected by the members of the student council and executive committee. They glanced solemnly at the participants, as though telling everyone no one is to come near this treasure.

On the other hand, the participants had already begun their struggle even at the starting line. Since it was impossible that they could all stand evenly at the line, they each fought for their own advantageous position.

"Stop pushing!"

"Back off! I'm from the Athletic Team! People with short legs like you should stay out of our way!"

"What'd you say!? I was about to tell you to get lost!"

"Hey! Stop pushing the girls!"

"If you girls don't want to fall down and cry because you got yourselves all dirty, then you should all stand aside!"

"And why're you girls even here? Stop getting in our way!"

"Wha!? How dare you!?"

"Take that!"

They shoved at each other with their arms, legs and shoulders as the struggle became rather ugly.

"Whoa...!?"

"N, no way... even Takasu-kun is taking part!?"

Like how Moses would part the Red Sea, a path suddenly opened up within the wall of people upon the arrival of one person, who thus walked casually towards the starting point - That person was none other than Takasu Ryūji. His eyes moved around intensely, his gaze could only be described as "deranged". He licked his lips

while scanning the crowd around him with an intimidating glare.

The sight of people backing off just by looking at his gaze - Normally this would cause Ryūji to feel hurt inside, yet it had become useful on this occasion, as he really wanted to win the "First Fuku".

He wanted to reach Taiga's side before anyone else. After his mind had been stunned, killed and gone blank once, he was now more determined than ever. Right now , he was mightily pissed.

He wanted to beat the crap out of that man who called Taiga his "little Princess", turn him into a pulp and discard him. He wanted to yell at him together with Taiga, "We don't need you!" "Scum like you don't deserve to be king!" "I will put that shiny crown on Taiga's head with my own hands, I don't need your filthy hands to do it!" *I want to support Taiga's very fragile back with my own hands, and give her the drive needed to move forward for the next ten years, or even the next hundred years. That king can go and rot as the trash that he is. I also need to abandon that foolish me, and let him watch me reborn. We don't need you anymore.*

For this aim, I will do anything... Or I'll never forgive my foolish self or face Taiga anymore.

"There's something we'd like you guys to know! First of all-- be careful not to get yourselves hurt! We have safety cushions placed at the finishing point!"

Standing at the starting line, Kitamura pointed to the finishing line, where there were indeed safety cushions.

"Thanks!"

The cushions were made up of the softly built and formidable looking Sumo Team members. Even in such weather, they wore nothing but their fundoshi briefs outdoors, revealing their snowy white skin, and slapped their armpits. They all bent forward, squatting with their shiny legs, standing knee by knee with their arms stretched out, as though declaring to everyone: *Let us be the ones to embrace the Lucky Guy!* "Eww... no way..." So thought a girl and withdrew as a result. "Whoa! Isn't that quite sexy?" So thought another girl and got turned on because of it.

Who cares!? Whether it's the Sumo Team or the Rugby Team, the one to be embraced by them will be me! So thought Ryūji, whose thinking could easily be misunderstood.

"Now to explain the route, so listen carefully!"

"Route? We can see it from here! Aren't we supposed to run around the track?"

Hearing someone said that, Kitamura's glasses flashed and said, "Wrong!" And then raised his hand to make a signal.

"Whoa!"

"Amazing! Surely this costs a lot?"

Visual markers suddenly began flashing under the feet of the contestants, these dizzying lights would lead them towards the finishing point.

"Truly amazing... but something's strange?"

"Why aren't the lights running along the track? And some of them are even disappearing into the campus!"

"So you've finally noticed!"

Kitamura cheerfully said,

"The Lucky Guy Race runs along the visual markers. It starts off as a straight line, and then it will enter the old school building, from the stairway entrance all the way back to the track field, which would lead to yet another straight line back to the finishing line! Do your best and run towards the end!"

Upon hearing Kitamura's explanation, the participants began moaning, "Whaaat--!?"

"W, w, wait a minute! Running into the old school building? Are you student council dumbasses telling us to run along a narrow stretch surrounded by only fences!? There's so many of us!"

"And we have to run past the stairway entrance as well, isn't that place extremely narrow!?"

"Just concentrate on the straight line section then! Everyone ready?"

Kitamura said matter-of-factly, letting everyone know it was useless to protest. *You can quit if you got a problem with it-- right?*

Ryūji was already standing by when everyone else was murmuring, and staring at the route ahead-- *That's*

right! If you got a problem with it, then quit already! In fact, everyone else should quit!

The route isn't that long, the challenge lies with the timing in entering the old school building, as that stretch's basically a narrow tunnel, and the path within will be the key to winning the race. I'll have to enter the building first in order to stop other contestants from blocking my way. As for the final straight dash to the finishing line, I'll leave it to fate. Before that, I must lead by a huge distance, I used to be a sports team member before, after all-- Badminton Team during my third year of junior high! I won't lose when it comes to speed! Ryūji bit his lips, and aimed his glaring attack towards his potential rivals -- the Athletic Team, who can't possibly be beaten in a normal running race. *Stay out of my way!* Ryūji began to exert pressure on other contestants with his ferocious eyes.

"On your marks! Get Set---!"

Staring forward, Ryūji didn't notice people whispering something behind him. He used his butt to casually impede those runners who were crouched in a starting pose, while the tips of his shoes were close to crossing the starting line--

"GO!"

BANG--! The gun had been fired.

Quite literally, Ryūji sped forward like a bullet. He had thrown everything he's got.

"Whoa!?"

But he never thought someone would ambush him, tugging the back of his shirt. Losing his balance, Ryūji fell, hearing people yelling, "We'll start by taking out Takasu!" "As long as we join forces, we won't lose!"

"Y, you bastards..."

Ryūji fell to the ground. "Thanks!" Someone said and stepped over his butt, and dust went into his eyes as he was about to get up again.

"W... why you...!"

You guys wanna play dirty? Bring it on!

"As if I would lose!"

Ryūji quickly got up, clutching a lump of dirt in his hand, and threw it at the despicable bastard attempting to overtake him - aimed right in his eyes, of course. " ARGH!?" "My eyes!!!" Ryūji quickly dashed forward as they stumbled and covered their faces with their hand, grabbing the person in front of him as he ran along--

"Nothing personal!"

"Yaaah!"

The person that got grabbed crashed into someone else , and they fell down together. Ryūji couldn't resist smiling. Right now he was completely relishing his villainous role. *You got a problem with that? I can even brainwash you! After all, I am Takasu the Delinquent, a born villain, but still living on strongly.*

"Whoa!! Takasu's back from the dead!"

"Scary----! His face's scary!"

"EEEK!"

"AHHH---!" Even the audience was screaming. The illumination caused by the visual markers shining upwards merely enhanced the inauspiciousness, uncomfortableness, and dangerousness of Ryūji's serious face in the evening sky. A person turned around to look at his face, and was immediately petrified out of fear -- *That's three people taken care of.*

"I know you, I remember you're called..."

"Aiyeee! I, I'm sorry---!!!"

Ryūji quietly whispered behind some stranger, causing him to tumble out of fear. *That's four down! But there's still some way to go, since there're still many people ahead. The Athletic Team's just too fast, there's no way I could've caught up with them since the beginning. That screw up in the beginning was too costly, way too costly!*

"You bastards-----!!!"

"KYAA! A ghost--!"

At first he thought he had taken out a fifth victim, but turned out the one who tripped was just a junior high schoolgirl spectator. "Damn!" Ryūji clicked his tongue,

and squinted his eyes as they scanned the track. The front batch of runners had already run into the school building and vanished from sight.

Dammit dammit dammit! I'll never catch up if they run in there! Not even dirty tricks would work anymore! What should I do!? Though he was out of ideas, Ryūji still maintained his position and ran pass the narrow turn into a seemingly dimly-lit cave - the school building with the fence on one side.

"WHOA!?"

"Tch, missed!"

Taiga's spin-kick flashed before his eyes -- or so he thought, but the speed of the ambush was slower than he expected. Mimicking Keanu Reeves from the Matrix, he dodged the unidentified object in the nick of time.

Falling down with the momentum, he discovered upon standing up that the object was someone's hand - sticking out from behind the fence.

"What the hell you doing!?"

"Sorry, but we ain't letting you pass! Besides the Basketball Team members, everyone else will have to get buried in the darkness!"

"You idiot! You just blew our cover!"

When did these people come in anyway? A group of strange men masking their faces with towels stood behind the fences, and using the darkness as cover, they ambushed the Campus King contestants, causing them to trip. Upon closer inspection, he noticed there were quite a few people who had tripped or were stepped upon in front of him.

"The hell is this!? I'm gonna have to report this to the teachers!"

"Go ahead! But we're definitely not letting you pass! Whoa! Someone else's coming!"

"Get them! It's the five-a-side soccer members!"

"ARGH!" The people that closely followed behind Ryūji had turned into food for these fence-creatures. *I*

can't believe there's people like them! But I can't waste my time here, I gotta think of some way to move forward -- And so Ryūji started running again.

"OW!"

"Oops! Sorry!"

He stepped onto someone's butt, but he didn't have time to stop. On one side was the cemented-wall of the crummy-old four-storey complex, on the other side was a fence full of weird people, and whenever he slowed down...

"Delinquent Takasu! I hear you really ain't that scary!"

"You're right, cause you guys are much scarier!"

The hands on the other side of the fence followed Ryūji along and stuck out wherever there were gaps, grabbing Ryūji's hair and clothes, while underneath him--

"YAHH!!!"

The fallen victims had turned into obstacles, constantly tripping Ryūji, forcing him to tread carefully in order to avoid stepping on them. Behind him were screams of

new victims being taken, while ahead were students who were tripped by the obstacles and piling up together. This was like a living hell, a cockroach trap used to ensnare human beings.

Damn! This is too annoying!

Ryūji made a double jump and leapt into the two-metre high fence, standing wobbly at its tip.

"He's still got that trick up his sleeve!?"

"D, don't talk to me right now!"

Compared to those who were stunned speechless as they looked up at him, Ryūji was even more scared standing at the top of the fence. "Eek!" Ryūji yelped silently as tears filled his eyes, he felt his vision darkening, but he still decided to walk past this narrow fence, which was only a few centimetres wide. *Don't look down, I can't fall--* Ryūji kept on telling himself that.

"Damn, can't believe he's using this trick! Pull him down--- OW! My hands!"

Ryūji had already forgotten himself, and mercilessly stepped on the hands that were preparing to grab him --

Crush them along with all the fear! I have to become first! That's all I can think of, I have to be the first to reach Taiga's side. For that stretch of road, that was all Ryūji was thinking of.

In the dark race track, there were more and more people that tripped and fell and were lumped together, this coupled with more runners rushing forward meant that the path was completely blocked. *Now's my chance--* Ryūji gave his all and adjusted his unsteady footsteps.

"Hey! Isn't that Delinquent Takasu!? No way!? Does he need to go this far!?"

"Yeah I do!"

"But why!?"

"It's too complicated! And it's none of your business!"

Ryūji finally overtook the stunned crowd that looked up at him. Now he was first, and with his amazing concentration, he ran across the top of the fence, and towards the beacon of light towards the end of the old school building corridor, which would lead all the way to the finishing point. Jumping off the fence, he landed on the ground.

He now emerged from the darkness earlier than anyone, ahead was a steep curve. In one breath, Ryūji jumped down four steps at a time---

At this moment.

"...!"

Aisaka Taiga stood up from her chair.

A rose-like colour appeared on her doll-like face.

Her moist eyes had widened while only looking at one male student.

The person that was in first position, running towards her, was none other than---

"Ryū..."

At this moment.

"Hey! No way!? Takasu-kun, it's Takasu-kun!!!"

"That's right! He's first! Amazing! Come on! You can do this!"

Amongst the audience standing up, Kihara Maya and Kashii Nanako yelled and applauded louder than anyone else. Just behind them and wearing a long coat, Kawashima Ami gasped silently,

"Eh--?"

She was crossing her arms with a blank expression, but her eyes glittered with an incredible sparkle.

At this moment.

"Eh!?"

Some of the audience noticed something wasn't right, and couldn't help but widen their eyes. This unbelievable sight had gotten everyone murmuring,

"T, that's fast...!"

Ryūji believed he had returned to the track field earlier than anyone else, so too did the audience, but at this moment--

A shadow turned from the corner at the right side of Ryūji and quietly overtook him. That person leaped off the stairs before him, landing on the ground with one leg , and standing from a position lower than Ryūji, turned around and said silently with squinted eyes,

"What a slowpoke."

"Ku..."

Kushieda Minori!?

Her untied hair fluttered with the wind. After coldly taunting Ryūji, she quickly turned and dashed off in a speed not even a boy could catch up with, as though dancing lightly along the straight track, she didn't turn her head around as she sped forward, throwing Ryūji far behind. The visual markers on the ground shone as though they were shining for Minori, leading her towards the finishing point.

I can't lose-- Ryūji's heart pumped more energy.

Definitely, definitely, definitely can't lose! Not to you!

"When you met Taiga's dad, did you open your eyes and look carefully?" -- That was what Minori had asked Ryūji back then.

Of course I had them opened.

But I overlooked it.

"Dammit, dammit dammit dammit! Bastard---!"

I'm the one who's mistaken, for doubting Minori's heart. If I had thought about it carefully, I would've understood, right? When that bastard took Taiga out for dinner every night, didn't that cause her to grow pimples under her chin and nearly upset her stomach? When there was roadwork, and that bastard asked me to come out to fetch Taiga, didn't I realize it was because he wasn't willing to park his car by the side and personally walk her home? By sending her so much money, shouldn't I have realized that he was only doing it so she wouldn't badger him? The reason he didn't eat anything homemade, and didn't let Taiga cook was because he didn't want to do any cleaning up, wasn't it? When he broke his promise with Taiga, he didn't even bother to apologize in person, and just simply sent me a message. That bastard had

avoided anything that was bothersome since the beginning, that idiot, scumbag, pighead--- The hints were all there!

And Ryūji's eyes had overlooked them all. He was only thinking of himself, and was unable to see the full picture. The one being terrible was Ryūji himself -- *How can I be such an idiot? How can I be such a stupid dog? Not only did I hurt Taiga, I even doubted Minori, and I can't even catch her. If I lose to her, then I'm really a useless scumbag! So I can't lose! Absolutely not!*

Running ahead, Minori was as serious as ever, and slowly accelerated along the straight track. Ryūji could hear the people catching up behind him mumble as they caught their breaths,

"That girl's fast! Dammit! We completely didn't consider their threat!"

"Isn't she the captain of the girls' Softball Team?"

"She was really fast. In order not to get ambushed, she was hiding all this time!"

Ryūji and the others were running with their all in trying to catch up with Minori's light figure. Though the finishing point was right ahead, Minori's stamina had started to wane, and Ryūji's distance with her was getting closer and closer, but so was the group right

behind Ryūji. Suddenly, he saw someone slowly approaching the track from the side with the corner of his eye, before he could see properly and react to it...

"Eh!? WHOA WHOA!? EEK---!"

Minori suddenly cried out. The strange people who approached the track had secretly dragged some athletic hurdles out and placed them right in front of Minori in the centre of the track. As these things can easily be surpassed by the Athletic Team members, the culprits have got to be from the Athletic Team. As it happened too suddenly, Minori, who had wanted to leap over the hurdles, quickly lost her balance and crashed onto the hurdle, falling hardly onto the ground and creating a lot of dust. Running right behind her, Ryūji nearly...

"YAAAHHH! LOOKOUT---!!!"

He tried to avoid Minori, who had tripped, but accidentally fell out of the track and landed on his face. He felt a burning sensation as his face fell on the ground. Minori didn't look at him, and quickly leapt up like a grasshopper. Ryūji also rolled forward and continued running at once. *If I fall, then I'll just stand up again and again, just like that girl*-- But as they were falling, one, two,

and three people now overtook them. Minori had now fallen into fourth position, while Ryūji was in fifth. He didn't think of anything else, but simply to run with all he's got. *I can't give up yet! I can't stop now! But the finishing line's right there, and those guys are about to get there!*

Is this really the end?

"Kushieda-senpai---! Take this---!"

Someone from the audience threw a white object towards Minori, which she grabbed naturally with her hand. It turned out to be a softball. She ran while holding the ball in her hand, and looked at the back of the group of frontrunners.

"ALRIIIIGHT!"

She suddenly stopped.

Stepping firmly on the ground with her feet, she bent her slender back, and concentrated all her energy to swing her right arm - the softball flew off like an arrow across the shining track, spinning as it shot towards its target.

"EH!?"

"OW OW OW!"

After meticulous calculation, the ball first knocked the head of the guy on first position, and then rebounded to smack the guy on second position. The two of them knelt on the ground by this sudden impact. "She's really ruthless!" Ryūji widened his eyes, and saw Minori turn around and yell at him,

"Nausicaa! (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nausica%C3%A4_of_the_Valley_of_the_Wind_(manga)) We're counting on you! Go! Do it for Taiga! Hurry!"

Who the hell's Nausicaa!? Though she was partly joking, Minori said it with a serious tone and gaze. She looked straight into Ryūji, and then in the next second leapt forward, grabbing the leg of the guy in third position.

"SUICIDE ATTACK!"

"ARGH!? The hell is this---!!!???"

They both fell screaming. Ryūji understood her intentions at once -- *Go! Overtake me!*

You must reach Taiga's side earlier than anyone else!

"Kushieda..."

The applause was so great it shook the ground.

There was screaming, mumblings and moanings.

"Amazing--!" As well as an ecstatic crowd that rushed onto the track.

At this moment.

Taiga still stood and watched the entire process.

The person who everyone thought would end up in first position suddenly stopped just before he was about to trip, and walked a few steps back towards two people

who had tripped and lay on the track, and yanked out the girl in her PE uniform underneath.

They looked at each other.

They didn't say anything, and simply began dashing.

It was unclear who started it first, but they were holding hands. Throwing off the group that nearly caught up with them in the nick of them, they ran past the finishing line together, both finishing in first place.

Taiga slowly sat back on her chair.

Her arms and legs did not tremble as she opened her eyes wide to look carefully at both of their faces. She sat firmly with her feet to suppress the upheaval in her heart , and simply said, "I'm fine." The thunderous applause and cheers had numbed her mind. "That's not fair!" "As if others are fairer!" The debates that raged on around were quickly drowned out by the sound of cheering. Being in the centre of all this - Taiga did not intend to stand up. She simply closed her eyes and sat on her throne.

The crown was placed on her head.

The two finishers both carried the crown together while holding each other's hand, looking intensely at Taiga's expression.

"I'm fine..." She kept repeating these words, which were subtly filled with pride-- *Don't worry about me, didn't you see me standing on my own?*

I can live well on my own even if I am alone.

* * *

"INCREDIBLE---! INCREDIBLE---! INCREDIBLE---! We're too incredible!!!"

In front of a fiery bonfire, an executive committee member... Haruta the director was screaming like a madman, he seemed really ecstatic... The Inter-Class

Competition, the Campus Queen Competition, and the Lucky Guy Race were all won by Class 2-C, making them the champions of the whole school.

Following the euphoria of the Lucky Guy race, the awards ceremony took place right at the track field, with Haruta proudly hoisting the awards above his head. With a bonfire burning in the centre, giving light to all students who participated in this "one day only" student festival, the bonfire night had officially started, and countless flames sparkled and danced under the night sky.

Wearing a long overcoat, Ami too stood by Haruta's side, holding a cheap-looking cup and said,

"Oh my, I'm so very~ happy! Oh no, I got tears coming out...!"

Her twitching iron mask also comes with a tear-generating mechanism. Her Class 2-C classmates surrounded her and said, "Good work, Ami-chan~!" " Aww, don't cry, Ami-chan!" "We're moved as well~!" " We all worked hard~!" "I never thought that idiot Haruta

would work this hard!" They were all good people, and some girls even began crying.. Within this moving scene, Haruta nodded happily,

"I have an idea. I'd like to give the MVP award to... Yuri-chan!"

"EH...!?"

Haruta's finger pointed towards the Single Lady (aged 30), who stood some distance away from the students. Taken aback, her shoulders shuddered. The classmates who all turned their heads around, with looks that seemed to understand something, they nodded to each other, their eyes filled with a pure glitter as they said,

"Now that you mention it... you're right..."

"It was Yuri-chan that suggested us holding a pro-wrestling show."

"We all worked hard indeed, but it's all thanks to Yuri-chan giving us this chance in the first place that we were able to work this hard."

"I agree! Yuri-chan's the MVP!"

"Yuri-chan! Thank you!"

"Yuri-chan... what's wrong?"

Suddenly becoming the center of attention, the Single Lady (aged 30) looked a bit abashed, she was unable to stand properly, and her hair looked ruffled under the bonfire light. She knelt on one knee and began to rub her forehead,

"Um... And I thought you would all hate me because of my narrow-mindedness... I'm supposed to be an adult already, and yet what I did was so childish..."

She dared not face her students eyes, yet Ami stretched out her hand and said,

"Sensei, please pull yourself together... There's something I wanted to ask you, why do you always wear clothes that match your skin-tone?"

"T, that's because I'm over 30..."

"Wow~! That's an age to be popular~!"

Tears started to flow out of the Single Lady's (aged 30) eyes -- tears that contained all sorts of emotions that were

mixed up like soup. She thought, *I'm already over 30, how popular can I be?* -- And drooped her shoulders, revealing wrinkles and dark rings around her eyes. But Ami continued,

"Sensei, I don't think this colour suits you. Your skin has a transparent feel, so you should wear something pink~ And since you still have a good figure, you should emphasize the curves in your body, those are your weapons! Besides, nobody in this day and age dresses so modestly anymore, even if they're over 30. Since sensei is still single, you should enjoy the romance and trendiness even more so. <3"

"K, Kawashima-san..."

"When I saw sensei leave school a while back, I saw you holding an Hermes Garden Party series bag, right~? Is that the new version? It looks great on you... Kya!?"

The Single Lady (aged 30) was hugging the angel in an overcoat, repeating the same words over and over: " Thank you! Thank you! Thank you..."

It was a joyful scene-- everyone in Class 2-C surrounded the two and applauded them cheerfully. Haruta placed his hand over the Single Lady's (aged 30)

shoulder, as well as casually clinging over Ami's shoulder and said,

"Yuri-chan, you should join in with the celebrations!"

"Eh? Can I come? But you won't be able to do anything mischievous then!"

"It's fine! Absolutely no problem! We were planning to hold a celebratory party in the family restaurant anyway! "

"But I'll just drag up your average age, won't that be a problem!?"

"Who cares about such details!?"

The two-metre tall bonfire burned intensely within the noisy students, their shadows flickered under its light. The faces of the other classes' students were also dyed in orange. They sat and looked at the bonfire with joyous, tired and mischievous faces, cherishing this soon to end student festival in their own ways. There were boys having lots of fun with girls from other schools, students from the same class were gathered together in their own activities, and even couples huddled tightly with each other. Under a tent nearby, the executive committee

members were holding their own celebratory party with teary eyes, while the student council members sat shoulder by shoulder on the tables, keeping watch over this final event.

The once-a-year, one-day-only commotion was soon coming to an end.

"You'll be going to the party as well, right, Campus Queen?"

"Hmm... if you go I'll have nothing to eat... but I can come as well, Mr Lucky Guy."

"Hey, OW!"

Outside the circle of students surrounding the Single Lady (aged 30), Ryūji yelled while jumping away, because the princess was crudely pinching the glorious battlescar on his face, which was pasted with a plaster.

"You're hurt? How pathetic! How about I take you to Miyake Clinic tomorrow?"

"Miyake... isn't that a vet!?"

"Hahaha, so you found out" -- Taiga laughed like a devil. Wearing a Swarovski crystal crown on her head, it suited her dress and angel wings. Anybody would find her cute like this. It seemed her personality had nothing to do with her appearance, they could in fact be opposites of each other.

Just who was I getting hurt for anyway... Ryūji couldn't help but glance at Taiga.

"Hmph!" She squinted her eyes haughtily, revealing a mischievous smile.

That's right, she's smiling. When she knew the father she was waiting on was running way again, upon reading the phone message herself, Taiga merely gave a smile more annoying than usual. "Show it to me" *Even when I showed the phone message to her...* "Whoa!?" *I thought she was gonna toss my phone away, that got me nervous like hell.* In the end Taiga merely smiled as she did now, "Just kidding" and still held on to his phone. She was just teasing Ryūji, laughing at his nervous look. Taiga was now bathed in the illumination of the flames, her mini dress glittered elegantly.

She completely doesn't understand how worried I was-- Besides sighing, there was nothing else Ryūji could do.

"You... I didn't know you were this strong. And I thought you would go hysterical."

"I never thought of that person as anyone to begin with. It's fine. To be honest, I don't really care, since nothing has changed. By the way, how dare you openly hold hands warmly with Minorin in front of my own eyes? When did you guys make up anyway?"

"Eh... well..."

Make up... I don't think I have done so yet. At this moment Minori was standing quite some distance away from them, happily chatting with other people. Ryūji took a quick glance at her before moving his eyes off and scratched his head-- *Now that I think about it, I did hold hands with her amidst all that chaos... with this hand...* Upon thinking about it, he started to shiver, and his face felt like burning.

That's right, we held hands.

"Oh... ohhh"

"What's with all the chanting of 'Ohs'? You a fan of the Fukuoka Hawks? Stop grinning like an idiot already and hurry up and go apologize! You dim-witted trash dog! You've promised me that, haven't you!?"

(Referring to Oh Sadaharu, the former coach of the Fukuoka Hawks and Japan national baseball team. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadaharu_Oh, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fukuoka_SoftBank_Hawks)

Taiga shoved Ryūji on the back, not giving him any chance to retort. "Ow ow ow ow!" Ryūji moaned and swung to dodge her. At this moment...

"Huh?"

"Music..."

The speakers started playing some off-tune waltz, the rhythms formed by the various notes sounded as though they're dancing under the bonfire illuminated night sky.

Speaking of which-- Ryūji began to smile, and accidentally provoked his face injury. *I remember one of the Lucky Guy prize includes that... right? They should have it, right?*

"I'll apologize to Kushieda, but first..."

Taiga's eyes glowed, reflecting a flame that was sparkling hot, like a flaming ruby. "If you don't mind..." Ryūji managed to muster words that he wasn't used to speaking. Licking his lips, he stretched his hands towards Taiga... *It isn't bad to do this once in a while, right?*

"Would you like to..."

"MI---NO---RI---N---!!!"

But Taiga ignored Ryūji, and brutally interrupted him, suddenly calling out to her best friend. Her yell was like a tiger roaring, and Minori quickly turned around,

"What what what!? What happened what happened what happened!?"

And quickly rushed towards Taiga's side, rubbing her neck, her forehead, as though wanting to rub everywhere from Taiga's hair to her neck.

"Minorin Minorin Minorin! I like you I like you I like you I like you I like you---!"

"OKOKOKOKOK! I know I know I know! Oh--- Taiga's so cute! You look great in a crown! The cutest princess in the whole world! So cute so cute so cute!"

"That's because Minori was the one who placed it on me~ That's why I'm happy~!"

"Not just me, Takasu-kun also came first, you know?"

"I didn't hear that! I didn't see that! I don't know!"

Taiga turned into an animal as usual and huddled with Minori, who had bandaids all over her face, rubbing her face and sniffing at Minori's neck, naturally relaxing her whole body.

What is she doing... Seeing Taiga's behaviour, Ryūji could only smile silently.

"Hahaha... it tickles!"

Minori only smiled. Even when looking at Ryūji's eyes, noticing Ryūji's gaze, she merely shrugged her shoulders, but she was still gentle as always.

The relaxed Taiga suddenly lifted her head, crudely removing herself from Minori's embrace, and stood alone while gazing forward, along the direction where she was looking...

"Kawashima-san, would you like to dance with me?"

"No, no, no, please dance with me."

"I've always admired you... Your Highness's elegance has completely captured my heart."

With the waltz playing in the background, Ami was surrounded by a lot of boys, regardless of which year, which class, and even which school they came from, they all expressed their adoration for her. As for Ami, she wrinkled her forehead, looking at all the hands stretched towards her while looking troubled. In fact, she was actually happily assessing everybody.

"Oh, well... What should I do~~! What a mess, I really don't know how to handle such a situation~!"

Ami twitched and made an expression of helplessness with her pretentious iron mask. The burning bonfire was too hot for anybody to approach, yet this scene was way too cold... especially those who knew Ami's true nature.

"If you're at such a loss, than you should dance with me, Bakachi---!"

"EHHH...!?"

Like a mischievous kitten, Taiga lightly leapt up, and proceeded to bite Ami after badgering her a bit.

"Kya! Stop it, Aisaka-san! Let go, that hurts... I mean it. .."

"Come! Hey, I said I want to dance with you!"

"I already said that hurts! You stupid midget!"

Before Ami revealed her true colours, Taiga was constantly grabbing Ami's shoulder from behind her. Eventually, the scene featured Ami fleeing Taiga, Taiga chasing Ami, Ami continuing to flee...

"Take this!"

"Ugh!"

A sudden wrestling hook! As though a continuation of the pro-wrestling show, Taiga had pushed Ami down and pressed her onto the ground, the crowd began shouting, "Start counting!" "One! Two!" It seemed like a complete waste for the cute dress and angel wings specially prepared for Taiga to be worn by a fierce tiger.

Should I stop her? Or just leave them alone? Just thinking about this was enough to give Ryūji a headache. *Ami will be fine, since she's strong.* Ryūji helplessly looked at the two of them...

"Takasu-kun... I'm sorry."

Someone lightly tapped Ryūji's shoulder.

It was then that he noticed Minori standing beside him .

Minori's face was dyed crimson by the flames, her eyes looking at Ami bickering with Taiga. With a bit of hesitation, Ryūji still lowered his head and said,

"I should be the one apologizing... I was the one who didn't know anything either. I'm sorry, for saying such mean things to you... I'm really sorry."

Minori widened her eyes anxiously, and shook her head furiously,

"No! It's not that... Takasu-kun..."

She closed her eyes, and after some time, managed to compose herself and said,

"It's my fault for not telling Takasu-kun anything beforehand... I purposely didn't tell you, and used it as an excuse to show that I know more about it than you do, and then blame you for not knowing anything... I didn't tell you about what you should know, it's not fair for you ."

She stopped as she said up to here. The waltz continued to play, but still no one danced. The students were either sitting or standing and speaking with each other, all squinting their eyes because of the dazzling flames. As for Taiga, she had accidentally let Ami escape,

and was catching her breath while looking disgruntled. During this moment, a bespectacled boy came before her out of nowhere,

"Aisaka, I'm not the Lucky Guy, but could I have the honour of asking you for a dance?"

Taiga's eyes widened in surprise. The bonfire now crackled loudly, the flickering flames reflected on her moist eyes, moving left and right.

"Well... aren't the rules set by the student council?"

Kitamura smiled, and without hesitation reached his hand out towards a stiff Taiga,

"That depends on Aisaka's decision."

Taiga looked at the the hand Kitamura handed out.

"So is it a yes or a no? Aisaka Taiga, will you dance with me?"

Ryūji stood far off looking at Taiga. Though her face looked blurry under the illumination of the flames, but he didn't need to guess to know that it was burning red. *Maybe I could even hear her heart beating wildly, right?*

The crowd began to point at Taiga and Kitamura and gasped, "The four-eyed student council member is inviting the Palmtop Tiger!" "Stop that, that's asking for trouble!" While some whistled and decided to watch the show develop, Kitamura was unmoved, and kept his hand stretched, awaiting Taiga's reply.

"W... wouldn't that get in the way of your work... with the student council?"

"It's fine. I'd like to dance with my friend on such a night."

Taiga's face smiled warmly, her huge wet eyes merely looked at Kitamura, hesitation reflected in her wavering gaze. She closed her eyes and opened them again, not caring about the onlookers.

"Kitamura-kun..."

Taiga called out the name of her crush,

"Thank, thank you... I mean it."

Hearing Taiga's words, Kitamura squinted his eyes behind his glasses, as though smiling,

"Why are you thanking me? Sounds a bit strange, since there's not much to thank between friends."

"Really?"

"Isn't it? ... So what is your answer?"

"Heh heh... Then how should we dance?"

"We hold our hands and look into each other's eyes, and keep turning until we're tired of it. I think."

Taiga laughed, and shyly looked towards the sky before holding onto Kitamura's outstretched hand. "Oh! They've held hands! How passionate!" Someone decided to risk his life to drive up the atmosphere, while others clapped their hands due to the euphoria of the school festival.

But Taiga didn't mind.

She didn't mind and smiled.

I'm fine on my own..."

But you still called me out, and stretched your hand towards me, so I'm really grateful for that... Taiga thought, but did

not say it out loud to Kitamura or anyone else. She only moved her elegant dress and began to spin and dance.

Minori then revealed a startling truth-- about a year ago from now, Taiga's father had also appeared in the same manner.

She stood beside Ryūji, looking at the students merrily enjoying themselves around the bonfire and said,

"I knew the reason why Taiga is living alone now, so when I learned about it, I was really happy for her. Yet when the day came for finding a place to live together, Taiga's dad suddenly said he had work to do and went abroad. Taiga had picked a place to meet and was waiting for him all this time, and she only found out when the real estate company informed her about it, that her dad never bought any apartment, and had to cancel selling the original apartment... Maybe he found the planning, or perhaps the process of planning to be fun? Taiga sure had fun, but he had never intended to carry the plan out..."

"I see..."

Ryūji finally understood.

He understood why Taiga never answered her father's phone calls. He understood why she kicked him in the balls upon seeing him-- *It's all my fault for causing Taiga to waver, scaring her with my weak side, yet I never planned to hear Taiga explain herself properly.*

"That person..."

Perhaps mindful of Ryūji's mood, Minori began to address Taiga's father as "that person". She wanted to tell Ryūji that the fault is not with him, but with that person,

"Whenever that person gets into a fight with his second wife, he would feel like living with Taiga. Yet when he made up with his wife, he would cast Taiga aside. When I found out about this, I even called his office to yell at him, and you know what he said? He said , 'The bonds between family can never be broken, but bonds between lovers can, so it must be maintained at all costs.' ... Bastard!"

"He's basically treating Taiga as a plaything to amuse himself with, isn't he?"

"Yeah... that's it, you're absolutely right."

Minori began to stutter as the night flames reflected in her eyes,

"So during that time... when we were talking about this, it would have been better if I had told you about it properly. But... but... I didn't want to tell you..."

There was loneliness in her eyes-- But Ryūji decided not to tell her about it.

"Taiga didn't say anything about it, so only Takasu-kun knew. When I thought about it... how should I say, I somehow got stubborn. I didn't want to lose to you, or maybe... I didn't want to share with you the experience that Taiga and I went through in overcoming this. Then it would feel like I'd have the upper hand... I don't know why I felt that way, thinking, 'Because you didn't know about it, that's why you made the mistake, and so I'm better off in understanding Taiga than you are .' ... It's all my fault, for hurting Taiga again."

"It wasn't you that hurt her... Do you know why Taiga never told you anything?"

"I guess it's because she knew if she told me about her dad, I'd get mad about it, so she kept quiet. Taiga still didn't want anybody to think of her dad as a bad person, so ever since that incident a year ago, she never mentioned anything about her family to me."

"So that's why..."

The mystery has finally been cleared.

All this time Ryūji had never understood, with Taiga's daily life in such a mess, why Minori never came to help out with the chores if she is so good at it.

The reason was because Taiga had refused Minori's help.

If Taiga had asked for her help, Minori would surely blame it all on her dad... No matter how she would complain about him, she still didn't want other people to say bad things about him. Who knows, she's probably still feeling the same way, when she says she doesn't care, she's actually asking everyone to stop blaming him.

Minori raised her arms and shrugged her shoulders,

"I cherish Taiga a lot, so when she's not telling me something, I really feel hurt... So I find myself feeling jealous, even when it's towards Takasu-kun."

Under the changing waltz tune, there was a slight sense of self-hatred in Minori's voice. *What should I do to comfort her?* Just as Ryūji was thinking what to say...

"What am I? Some lacy decoration!?"

"Huh...!?"

Minori suddenly lifted her serious face and met Ryūji's eyes. *Was she joking? Or was she serious?* Her glittering eyes only reflected beauty. In any case, there was only one thing Ryūji could reply with,

"I, I think... it would be great... if you're not."

Minori also smiled gently towards Ryūji,

"Yeah..."

Ryūji then noticed that their distance had somehow become even closer since their time by the seaside during summer vacation. He only needed to stretch out his hand to bring her into his embrace.

However...

"Hey... I can converse normally again."

"Huh? What?"

Minori's words were as sudden as always, as well as enigmatic,

"Oh, nothing, it's nothing, really. I, I don't really mind... I, I'm fine..."

Cough! Cough! Minori suddenly began coughing. Ryūji tried to pat her back, but she quickly stood straight, as though being shocked by electricity, followed by intense shivering. She then began laughing loudly, even when no one was tickling her,

"A--HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!"

"How is that fine? You're hardly fine!"

When Minori suddenly jumped around and laughed like a maniac, Ryūji at first thought she was avoiding him, but then she crossed her hands and shoved them towards Ryūji. *Just what's going on in that mind of hers?*

"Can someone please tell me...!?"

Ryūji didn't bother to dodge Minori's attack and silently prayed to the heavens.

"Alright---! We've captured Takasu and Kushieda!"

"Huh!?"

"Wah!"

A few seconds of being motionless had got Ryūji trapped in misfortune. The two people that suddenly appeared behind them were none other than Kitamura and Taiga, who were still dancing romantically a while ago. Their hands, which were holding each other a while ago, were now used to grab hold of Ryūji and Minori tightly as they struggled to break free.

"Hey---! You gave us a fright! What on earth you guys doing!?"

"Hahaha! It's the last event of the school festival, after all, so we're going to dance together, of course!"

Kitamura and Taiga loosened their tightly clasped hands and grabbed hold of Ryūji and Minori on their own, forcing the four of them into a circle. Kitamura then dragged everyone beside the bonfire where everyone can see.

"Hahaha! This is embarrassing---! That's hardly dancing at all!"

Minori laughed merrily. On the other hand, Ryūji was cursing at Taiga,

"A, a, and I managed to get the mood right after so long! Why must you come and ruin it!?"

"Come on, let's create happy memories together... By the way, I too took a lot of effort, a. lot. of. effort. to get to dance alone with Kitamura-kun~~!"

Twist! Taiga grabbed Ryūji's fingers and twisted hard.

"OWWWW..."

Though Ryūji wailed softly, he was feeling more relieved, since seeing Taiga recover her spirits was more important than anything. *Even her squeezing fingers... are still so strong...* It's as though they're saying, "You're not allowed to be happy all by yourself!" And trying their best to crush Ryūji's fist.

"That hurts... Aren't you going too far!? You'll really crush it at this rate!"

"If your fingers are already breaking at such weak strength, then they ought to have been broken in the first place!"

"Quit fooling around, as if that's possible." Meanwhile, Kitamura and Minori had let them continue with their fierce argument while they got more and more excited.

"Right--! Let's go grab Ami!"

"OK--! Amin, wait for us!"

Revealing the eyes of a hunter, they took aim at their pitiful prey. The flames of the bonfire looked as though

they were shooting through the night sky as it crackled loudly. Ami was standing before it, oblivious to what was about to happen.

"Kawashima-san, you're really beautiful."

"Are you sure you haven't got a boyfriend? You're kidding, right?"

"That must be because everyone thinks you're unreachable, right?"

"Eh~~? T, that's not true~~! I'm really not that popular! "

"Oh, come on, you can be quite dense, you know?"

"That's right, and that's why you're cute that way."

"No way!? And how can you say I'm dense!? Oh man~~ why does everyone call me dense!?"

She seemed rather pleased with herself.

Wearing her happiness on her face, she pleasantly handled everyone's flirting. She was currently surrounded by boys from other classes, they all had good

looks, and all looked at least 500 times more intelligent than Haruta.

Kitamura, Minori, Ryūji and Taiga quietly crept behind Ami, slowly raising their arms, which were formed into a large circle.

"I really don't know why~ just why~ everyone thinks I'm dense~~? It's strange~~"

Just when Ami was chuckling joyfully,

"GOTCHA! We got Ami! YAY---!"

"KYAAA!? Wha? What's going on!?"

The four of them had successfully captured Ami. Scaring away the surrounding boys, they dragged the surrounded Ami back in front of the bonfire.

"Heh heh heh! Ami you sure look happy!"

"Have you forgotten about us?"

"That's how I was caught just now..."

"What's with that chuckling of 'hohoho' just now? How gross!"

Ami continued to struggle with her arms and legs, attempting to escape from the four people surrounding her.

"Let go, like I said let go! I don't want this! It's such a fine night, I don't want to spend it with people like you!"

Yet her struggles were futile. Ami's hands were held onto by Ryūji and Minori, forcing her to become part of the large circle. Even if she squatted she would quickly be yanked up again.

"Oh, come on, aren't we supposed to be childhood friends?"

"As if we are~~! Who wants to be childhood friends with an exhibitionist like you~~!?"

"Isn't Bakachi the exhibitionist around here? Just where'd you get that perverted dominatrix costume for the Campus Queen competition anyway?"

"Wha~!? I did that to drive up the atmosphere for you, you ungrateful midget tiger!"

"Wow! Even a pretty girl's fingers are this smooth~~!"

"Kyaa~~! Minori-chan, stop fiddling between my fingers~~!"

"Stop struggling and join us in our game of 'best friends'!"

"Eww~~! Takasu-kun's fingers are wet~~!"

"What's there to scream about...!? That's the way my body is built!"

And so the five of them spun around the bonfire and laughed merrily, yelled and shouted. In the end, they all revealed smiles on their faces. "A bunch of brats!" Under the laughter of the surrounding students, the flames gave warmth to the five of them.

This night was special.

At this moment, everyone had momentarily put aside the secrets within their hearts, for memories of this night will always hold a special place in their hearts, and they would spin and dance until the very end.

After the event of the night had ended, Class 2-C held their celebratory party, even their homeroom teacher was invited, and everyone turned up at the family restaurant to enjoy themselves. They then formed circles and began spinning and chatting merrily.

Whenever I laugh I would feel pain, but as long as I endure it for this night, so maybe, perhaps, definitely... I think it'll be fine.

Author's Notes

Lately my bank gave me a acupuncture massage rod as a gift. There're many acupuncture massage rods in this world, but this one is especially good. Whenever I feel like it, I would use it to press the areas around my neck, it feels so good I can't stop. I was so addicted to it that I gave it a horrendous nickname -- the "Toxic Rod". Whenever I feel pain when going out, I would take out my Toxic Rod and massage away, but the stares of people was always strict. When I was young, I felt I was so normal no one would care, but now they were all looking at me with strange eyes, how sad... This is Yuyuko (aged 29) Even though it's no longer monsoon rain season, I'm still sleeping in a quilt normally used during winter, and I'm thinner at last.

Back to topic, much thanks to everyone that bought *Toradora!* Volume 5! Before I knew it I discovered that this is already the fifth volume of the series. Thanks to everyone's support that we're able to publish this far. Is everyone having fun reading this? Have I awarded everyone enough for their support? I'm very happy that you're willing to read my work, and I'm thankful for it. So I hope to continue repaying everyone's sincerity with my work, and continue to march forward in romance

novels (even if it means forgetting to replace my blankets)! No sense of season, you say!? My life doesn't need that sort of thing! I hope to be able to get *Toradora!* Volume 6 published by the end of this year (2007). If you're willing, please continue to give me your support and energy, I'm counting on you guys!

Now let me update my readers on my current goings... I bought a few bonsais, but they all die one by one as soon as I bought them!

A while ago, I read a book called *Botanical Life* written by Itou Seikou-sensei. It mainly covers the details of growing bonsais in the balcony. After reading it I was greatly affected, and felt like turning this into a hobby. And so I bought all sorts of bonsais to try out, but they all end up dying, and not one survived. It would start to wilt the moment I bring it home, it's "countdown to death " was unstoppable. The spirited looking rosebud shooting upwards in the flower shop was now a charred black carcass. The parts known as petals were dark purplish on the sides, shriveled up and disintegrating. This wasn't what I had hoped to see. I watered them regularly, but why did it turn out like this? Just what did I do? The sickly plants now emit an aura of death in my home, and right now my place is completely covered in a

depressing melancholy, full of "negativity". How did it come to this... Damn... And I had wanted to obtain some of the life force from these plants and live energetically...

Anyway, many thanks to everyone who read till the end, as well as to my main editor and Yasu-sensei, and please don't give in to my aura of "negativity"!

Takemiya Yuyuko